



HE SAYS
HE'S JUST A
FRIEND

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Chapter 1 - The Very First Night

A/N: Just so there's no confusion, this story is written from two alternating perspectives in first person, so the name at the beginning of each chapter is the POV character. I originally wrote the whole thing in third person, but it felt too distant if that makes sense. Anyway, I hope you enjoy.

- Emmett -

The smell of popcorn and cheap beer hit me as soon as I stepped into the bowling alley. Ahead of me, a dozen people waited in the line for shoes. I took out my phone to send a text to my best friend to let her know I'd arrived. Thanks to a fender bender that kept traffic backed up for nearly twenty minutes, not to mention the fact I had to convince my mother to let me drive her car, I was already running late. I didn't want my date to think me rude or inconsiderate. This wasn't the best first impression.

"Can you go already?" The guy behind me sounded annoyed.

I glanced up from my phone to see the line had moved forward a few feet. I closed the gap and glanced back at the guy. He was very attractive. Even as he pursed his lips to the side sourly, I couldn't help but admire him with his freckled cheeks and strong jaw. Lines of irritation formed between his dark brows. He had his thick brown hair pushed to the side in a haphazardly sexy way.

"Sorry about that," I said.

"Whatever," the guy murmured, crossing his arms over his chest, doubling the size of his already impressive biceps. He had a nice muscular frame. But not in like a bulky, football player kind of way, more like the leaner track team guys, or even a swimmer (I loved me a swimmer).

He looked off to the side, clearly uninterested in continuing the interaction.

After receiving my shoes, I headed over to find the lane number Carrie gave me. She sat in the orange plastic seats that glowed under the blacklight, watching her boyfriend take his turn. Jackson tossed his neon green ball at an odd angle, sending it straight into the gutter. Carrie threw her head back laughing as Jackson let out a string of curses.

"That's what you get for being too cocky, boy," Carrie told him as he returned to her. She tucked her thick curls behind her ear as she stood up to kiss him. Her bronze skin looked so much darker in this lighting, with her hot pink top glowing in contrast.

Jackson looked up at me, through the mass of Carrie's hair. "Hey, man."

I envied Jackson's ability to grow a full face of stubble. Technically, I could grow facial hair. However, none of it connected. It ended up looking like I couldn't decide between growing a mustache, muttonchops, and a chin beard, so I'd chosen all three. It was a mess of volcanic proportions. Which was why I rarely went more than a couple of days without shaving.

I returned the greeting and looked around, confused. Carrie and Jackson were alone.

"Where's my date?" I asked.

Carrie and Jackson shared a sympathetic glance. That didn't bode well. Just as Carrie opened her mouth to speak, someone brushed past me. The surly stranger from the shoe line sat down and carelessly kicked off his Nikes. His white shirt turned almost lilac under the blacklight.

"Clay!" Jackson was very excited to see him. They shared a complicated straight boy handshake. The effort seemed halfhearted on Clay's end.

"Dude, I thought you weren't going to make it."

"When I make a commitment, I keep it." Clay put his foot in his chair, yanking at the laces on his bowling shoes.

I knew this was not my date. That guy's name was Tanner. That scraggly twink paled in comparison to the gorgeous clean-cut brunette boy talking to

Jackson.

Carrie took my arm and pulled me aside. "I'm so sorry, hun. Tanner canceled. He isn't coming."

"What happened?"

"He texted me this like fifteen minutes ago." She took her phone out and showed me the screen.

TANNER: *Me and Brian just made up. Longest two weeks of my life. Sorry to flake on you. But you totally get it.*

I gritted my teeth and glared at Carrie. "You got me a date with a guy on the rebound?"

Carrie stuck her phone into her back pocket and huffed. "You said after what happened with Alfie, you just wanted someone to have fun with. 'Nothing serious or long term, Care.' Those were your exact words."

I wanted to be upset, but I did actually say that. I didn't want to risk falling for another jerk who would just end up breaking my heart.

Besides, it wasn't Carrie's fault Tanner got back with his boyfriend. It was no tremendous loss. He and I only shared a few casually flirty texts over the last week since Carrie wrangled me into this date. I mean, did I think he was a total dick for texting *her* and not *me* to cancel on *ME* ? Maybe. Would I get it over it? Sure. Would I let this setback totally ruin my night? Probably.

When we returned to the boys, Jackson reached his hand out. Carrie took it and did a little spin into his arms. Jackson kissed her cheek before turning his attention to me. "Emmett, this is my buddy Clay. Clay, this is Carrie's friend Emmett."

Carrie held up a finger. " *Best* friend actually."

"Hi," I said.

"Yeah, hey," Clay mumbled, looking me over with harsh eyes.

"You guys mind being on a team?" Jackson asked.

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me."

"Whatever," Clay said. "Who cares?"

"Yippee," I mumbled under my breath. I glanced at Carrie, locking eyes long enough to mentally convey that I wasn't thrilled with this, but I'd go along with it because I loved her. And she owed me massively for this.

"Emmett's really good," Carrie told Clay, talking me up as her best friend duties required.

"Fantastic." Clay shook his fist in the air, feigning enthusiasm.

He was seriously hot, but he seemed like kind of a dick. So exactly my type, I guess.

I sat in the free seat next to Clay while Carrie took her turn with a pink ball that matched her top. She went for the granny-throw between the legs method and knocked out nine pins.

The next half hour was excruciating. Clay grumbled and complained about everything: the fries were too salty, the popcorn didn't have enough butter, the soda was flat. It didn't help that I was already annoyed about being stood up.

When I missed picking up a spare by two pins, Clay jumped from his seat and gripped the sides of his head. "Are you fucking kidding me? That was a piece of cake. I thought you were supposed to be good."

I curled my hands into fists at my side, digging the nails into my skin. I really wanted to punch Clay. And not for the first time.

"Clay, relax," Jackson said. "It's just a stupid game."

Clay's jaw muscles tightened as he clenched his teeth, snorting through flared nostrils. He spun around and stalked off.

I chased after him. I'd taken enough abuse from this person I didn't know. It was time to speak my mind.

I caught up to Clay in the brightly lit lobby, outside the entrance to the small arcade. Grabbing his elbow, I spun him around to face me.

Clay's mouth fell open as he looked me over. He seemed shocked to see me.

"Did I do something to offend you?" I asked, narrowing my eyes. "Because this can't be about the thing in line. You can't be that much of an asshole."

Clay's hard shell broke; his face softened. "I'm sorry I'm being such a dick. It's not about you."

"It kinda feels like it is—" I jabbed a finger toward my face "—since I'm the one you keep yelling at."

Clay sat on the bench against the wall. A clamoring, clanging noise erupted from the arcade as someone shouted in celebration.

Clay pressed his elbows to his knees, pushing his hands through his hair, exhaling. "I had a fight with my girlfriend before I got here."

"That sucks." I sat down beside him. "Did you maybe want to, like, talk about it?"

Clay barked out an incredulous laugh. "With you?"

I shrugged. "Why not?"

"I've been a massive tool to you since we met. Why are you being so nice to me?"

"I'm not a grudge holder." I paused to consider that statement, then shook my head. "Actually, that's a huge lie. I'm a bitch with a long memory. I still haven't forgiven our lunch lady for the time she skimped on my tater tots."

My joke had the desired effect, making Clay laugh. Some of the tension in his shoulders eased. He was a lot cuter when his face wasn't pinched up.

"Seriously, I've been told I'm a good listener." I leaned against the back of the bench, clasping my hands together in my lap, watching Clay with raised brows, waiting.

Clay picked at a thread from one of the factory-made holes in his jeans and blew out a heavy breath. "She says I'm emotionally distant."

"Are you?"

Clay stayed silent as he stared down at the ugly geometric patterned carpet.

"Your silence is kinda implying the answer is yes."

"I'm not great at opening up to people. Especially when one of those people happens to be my girlfriend. I don't know why. It's just always been difficult for me."

"You're doing fine right now."

Clay's head snapped to the side. He stared at me, his mouth hanging slightly ajar. "Huh. I guess you're just easy to talk to."

"I get that a lot," I said. "I think it's because I'm kind of adorable."

Clay laughed again. It was a great sound, bubbly and sweet. I saw a glimpse of the not-so-angry guy underneath, and I very much liked him. "Yeah. That's totally it."

I patted Clay's knee. "No, seriously. What do you think is the issue?"

"She says I don't talk to her about anything important. Like our relationship, and how I feel about her. She says I shut down and become a robot whenever she tries."

"Do you?"

"Maybe."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Um, I don't know. We've been dating for a while, like three months, but I guess... I guess I just don't feel as—I don't know—connected to her as maybe I should. But I don't know how to tell her that."

"Three months and you don't feel a connection?" I pulled my lips back, baring my teeth in a grimace. "Eh. That's not great."

"Maybe connection is the wrong word. I definitely care about her. I love hanging out with her. She's such a cool person. There's just something missing."

"Like a spark?" I guessed.

"Exactly!" Clay's face lit up, full of relief. "You get it!"

"There's not a whole lot you can do about that. You either feel it or you don't. Some people just don't click—romantically speaking."

"I feel like an asshole because I feel like I should break up with her, let her go. But I can't." He was sort of spiraling, rambling, his words coming in such a rush they all sort of melded together as he stared down at his hands, picking at his thumbnail. "All my friends would think I'm crazy. She's like the hottest girl in school, and everybody loves her. And I get the honor of having to sleep with her. But sex is pretty much all they ever want to talk about."

I grabbed his shoulder to break him out of his prattling stupor. He looked up at me with these gorgeous brown eyes that just seemed to cut right through me. And he looked kind of sad.

I took a breath, hoping this would remind him that he needed to breathe. He seemed to get the hint because his nostrils flared as he took some measured breaths.

"Prolonging a relationship when you don't have feelings for someone is what makes you an asshole," I said. "Regardless of how hot she is. Like, sure, it'll hurt her, but the longer you wait, the worse it'll be. You hanging onto her, for whatever reason, prevents her from moving on and finding someone she can actually be happy with. You claim you care about her. Maybe you should ask yourself what's the best thing you could do *for her*."

He looked at me like I'd just delivered the most profound piece of wisdom in the history of western civilization. "You're pretty smart."

Because apparently I could not remain solemn for more than five minutes without mockery, I placed my hand under my chin, giving my best cherubic face. "Pretty and smart are both words often used to describe me."

"Is conceited another one?" Clay asked, cracking a smile.

"I prefer confident."

"Dude, you passed confident like three self-compliments ago."

I burst out laughing at that. I felt oddly at ease with him. Which was exceedingly rare for me.

"Are you good now?" I asked.

"Good might be too strong. *Better* is more like it." Clay patted my knee and the hair on my leg felt like it was standing at attention, my skin prickling with goosebumps. "Thanks."

I ignored my body screaming at me that this was an attractive male person with a very sweet face and adorable freckles and a physique for which Michaelangelo might spurn his *David*. I had to reel my unrealistic crush back in, so I did what I do best. I insulted him. "So, if we go finish this game, are you going to stop being such a little bitch?"

Clay threw his head back, laughing, his hands clutching his flat stomach. "I think I can manage that."

"Awesome. Because I want to annihilate Carrie and Jackson."

"That's brutal." His mood seemed to have lifted. And I kind of loved that I could do that for him. At least I could be of use to somebody. Tanner didn't want me. And Alfie certainly didn't.

"I can't stand to lose," I said.

"We have that in common." Clay laid a hand on my shoulder. "Let's kick their asses."

"Sweet Jesus!" I waved my hand at my face, like one of those ladies at my grandmother's church who jumped up during the sermon to jog around the pews in her dated floral dress and kitten heels, shouting gibberish that used to make me giggle until my grandmother gave me her sternest glare to silence me. "Now I know it's been too long since I had a boyfriend, because sadly that is the sexiest thing a man's said to me in months."

Clay raised his brows, emotion draining from his face. "You're into guys?"

"Very much so." I dropped my smile, remembering not everyone in this town was accepting as my usual circle. "Is that a problem for you?"

Clay was quick to shake his head. "Of course not." An indecipherable look crossed his face. "I've never met anyone who's, like, *ya know* ." He gestured to me.

I knew what he meant, but I decided to play it off as a joke. "Handsome? Brilliant? Greek? Stop me when I get there."

"Um, no." He let out an uncomfortable laugh.

I laughed too, at his distraught face. "Your naivete is adorable. And, no that's not me hitting on you." Even though I totally wanted to.

"I-I didn't think you were."

"Just so you know, gay is not a dirty word. Despite what some of the cousin-loving, redneck, backwoods Bama Jethros in this town think."

"I really didn't mean to imply anything," Clay blurted in a panic.

I placed a hand on Clay's shoulder. I took it as a good sign that he didn't flinch away from my touch. Because that did happen once. "Don't worry about it."

"I don't care about that kind of thing," Clay insisted. "I don't think it should be a big deal."

"Agreed." I nodded.

I wanted to change the subject. I didn't enjoy being all doom-and-gloom. Carrie might disagree with that statement. She called me a brooder. Maybe she was right. I'd done an awful lot of brooding since the miserable failure of my last (first) relationship. But that'll happen when your boyfriend ghosts you and then gets caught making out with a girl two weeks later.

I turned to Clay. "But you know what is a big deal?"

Clay shook his head, still wearing a serious expression.

I gripped my hand into a fist between us. "The two of us utterly destroying our friends' confidence and crushing their spirits. And maybe making them cry a little."

"That's kinda twisted." Clay's lips spread into a wide grin. He tapped his fist against mine. "Let's do it!"

Chapter 2 - Is It Really So Strange?

- *Clay* -

For the third day in a row, I woke up from a dream about Emmett. It was nothing noteworthy. We were just hanging out, doing fun things. In the most recent, we rode go-karts. We were in the same car and both of us had steering wheels. The only way to make the car move was for us to work together. It was so bizarre, yet so fun. I regretted waking up so soon.

After my morning routine, I opened my bedroom door, which led to the kitchen. My bedroom was once our formal dining room. My parents had it renovated when they had my baby brother two years ago. They wanted the baby upstairs with them, and there were only three rooms up there. I gave up my room so my little sister could keep hers. I say gave up, but I had no choice. My parents didn't want thirteen-year-old Rachel alone on the ground floor. The dining room wasn't as big as my old bedroom, but my parents added a small private bathroom, so I wouldn't have to trek up and down the stairs all the time. It also featured the added benefit of a private entrance, since the dining room opened out onto the back patio. Sneaking in and out got so much easier. For that, I would gladly sacrifice the extra square footage.

The kitchen was empty. No surprise there. It was eleven o'clock on a Thursday. My parents were both at work. Teddy off at daycare. And Rachel probably went out with her friends, enjoying the last days of summer vacation.

I searched the refrigerator for something to eat. Nothing spoke to me, so I shut the door and grabbed a power bar, going back to my room.

Growing bored with Netflix and YouTube after twenty minutes of each, I pulled out my phone and texted Jackson to ask if he was free. We could hit the batting cages and grab a burger from that place across the street. I could

really use the distraction to get my mind off how shitty I still felt about breaking up with Summer.

JACKSON: *Sorry dude. Can't. Working on my car with my pops.*

So much for that plan.

I had other friends I could call. But Duke and Mark were both doing summer training, readying for the upcoming football season. Brandon didn't get home from his family's trip to their lake house until tonight. And, to be honest, I didn't really feel like seeing Tyler at the moment. He was probably off fishing, anyway.

Emmett's face popped into my mind. His green eyes with just a hint of golden brown around the pupil. Thick black hair gelled and coifed to messy perfection. Olive skin that was all natural. No amount of sun or fake tanner could give someone that perfect tone. And he had such a soothing voice. He pulled me back from the edges of a panic attack with just a few words and a well-timed joke.

On a whim, I opened Instagram and went to Jackson's feed to find a post with Carrie. From there, I searched Carrie's followers for Emmett. All I knew about him was last his name: Noble. Carrie made a comment about it being ironic given his dishonorable behavior, rubbing her nose in our victory. Only one result. I clicked on it. The profile was private. Because of course it was.

I couldn't let it go at that, so I asked Jackson for Carrie's number. My only other link to Emmett.

JACKSON: *Why?*

I could picture the confusion contorting my best friend's face.

CLAY: *She mentioned some hot girl she knew the other day. Thought I could get her to hook me up.*

I wondered why I felt the need to lie. Jackson wouldn't care that I wanted to talk to Emmett.

Could it be the gay thing? It couldn't be that. If it bothered me, why would I want to talk to him? Why would I be dreaming about hanging out with him?

JACKSON: *Awesome. Glad you're not taking a year to get over Summer, like you did Dinah.*

It wasn't a fucking year. It was nine months. Nine months in which I was blissfully unattached. Until Summer happened. Both the girl and the season.

A moment later, Carrie's contact information appeared. It never occurred to me how many Rs were in her name until I saw it spelled out in text: *Carrie Herrera* . It was a weird thing to fixate on but my brain just did that sometimes with the most random shit.

I clicked the number and confirmed on the pop-up, asking if I wanted to call it.

Three rings later, something crunched on the other end of the line. "Hello?" The word sounded more like an accusation than a greeting.

"Um, hey, Carrie. I-It's... It's Clay."

More crunching. "Oh. Hi." She sounded slightly less inconvenienced than previously.

"I need a favor."

"Is this about Jackson?" There was a touch of confusion in her voice. Understandable, given that I'd never once called her in the year and a half she'd been dating my best friend.

"Um, no." I shook my head, even though she couldn't see me. Why was my heart suddenly pounding? My body was reacting like I was doing something dangerous or wrong. "I just wondered if you could give me your friend's number."

"Which friend. I have many."

Apparently, Emmett and Carrie shared the boastful trait. Or confident, as Emmett called it.

"The one from the other night. Um, you know, bowling?" For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to say the name. I hadn't forgotten. Emmett had been on my mind for days. Especially since I broke up with Summer the day after our talk. I reminded myself of his words every time I remembered the hurt in her face and felt like human garbage. I did what was best *for her* .

"You mean Emmett?" Her confusion had doubled.

"Uh, was that his name? I thought it was Elliot."

What are you doing, stupid?

Why was I acting like this?

" *Uh-huh* ." It didn't sound like she believed me. I didn't blame her. Especially because I'd said his name more than once that night. I was making this needlessly complicated. "Well, it's *Emmett* . And sure. I guess. Should I text it to this number?"

"Yeah. That'd be great!" I felt a small thrill at my accomplishment. Though I didn't know why. "Thanks, Carrie."

"Whatever." She hung up without another word.

When the text popped up, I opened my messages and saw that she'd only sent his number, along with a single word.

CARRIE: *EMMETT*

The all caps seemed a bit passive aggressive, but maybe she was protective of her friend.

I stared at the number. Just ten little digits shining in bold blue. My thumb hovered over it, wondering what I would say. What would Emmett say?

With a nervous pit in my stomach, I tapped the number and it started to ring.

Chapter 3 - Speak Now

- *Emmett* -

My phone rang, distracting me from my reading. I stuck my thumb in the middle of the pages to hold my place and picked up the phone. I stared at the unfamiliar number, furrowing my brows. The only people who called me were my grandparents and my dad. And my mom when she was angry. Everyone else I knew texted. I pressed the button to cease the vibrations, assuming it was a scam or a telemarketer.

If it was important, they would call back or leave a voicemail.

A moment later, a text popped up. I picked up the phone again to read it.

UNKNOWN: *Guess u don't like talking on the phone either but I thought it was rude to just text out of the blue.*

EMMETT: *Who is this?*

UNKNOWN: *Clay.*

I sucked in a breath at reading that singular word. Why would he want to talk to me? Sure, we had fun beating the pants off Carrie and Jackson, but I never expected to see him again, unless I happened to be at one of Jackson's parties that Carrie was always trying to drag me to.

CLAY: *From bowling.*

CLAY: *Jackson's friend.*

CLAY: *The asshole.*

I watched the dancing ellipsis as Clay typed something else. Apparently, he was one of those people who sent every thought as a separate text.

CLAY: *I shoulda probly said tht to start. Sry.*

EMMETT: *Need more advice?*

After it sent, I worried how that might come off. What if Clay misconstrued the joke as annoyance?

Before I could freak out too much, my phone dinged.

CLAY:

CLAY: *Maybe some other time.*

CLAY: *I was just kinda bored.*

CLAY: *Thought mayb you'd wanna hang out or smth.*

I read the message again to make sure I had comprehended it correctly. My pulse quickened a bit as I typed my answer.

EMMETT: *Sure .*

Clay sent an address, along with a message.

CLAY: *Can u meet me here?*

I clicked on the address, which opened in the Maps app. I saw nothing of much interest in the area, but I had nothing else to do. Too bad it was all the way across town. It was too far to ride my bike, and I didn't have my own car. Hell, my mother barely let me drive hers, despite me being almost eighteen.

I let out a disappointed sigh, relaying the bad news to Clay.

CLAY: *Send me ur address I'll pick u up.*

I sent my details.

CLAY: *Holy shit!*

CLAY: *That's just down the street from me.*

CLAY: *B then n 5.*

I assumed "then" was a typo, meant to be "there." Maybe he didn't notice. Maybe he didn't care. If I'd done that, I would have to send an immediate reply to clarify. He didn't seem to share that concern.

I looked down at my shirt that had a salsa stain from my breakfast burrito. I jumped up and stripped the shirt off, digging through my dresser for a clean t-shirt. I ignored my concert tees and some of my more colorful shirts—basically anything that even sort of implied my gayness. After finding something suitable, it occurred to me I should probably also find some pants.

The doorbell rang as I was tying my shoe. My mom had already gone to work, so I stuck my head out my bedroom door and shouted, "It's open," down the stairs.

The front door cracked open. Clay stuck his head inside. A backwards baseball cap concealed the shaggy hair on top of his head. Only the shorn sides were visible. I forgot how cute he was.

Clay looked around apprehensively. "Hello? Emmett?"

"I'm up here," I called out, getting his attention. "You can come up. I just need a second."

I returned to my room, shoving all the dirty clothes off the floor under my bed. Then I yanked the covers up to make it look halfway presentable, as if I actually made my bed everyday. I grabbed my other shoe and raced to the bed to sit down as Clay appeared at the door.

"Hey," Clay said.

He wore a black v-neck Under Armour shirt that hugged his body tantalizingly well, red basketball shorts (also quite clingy), and his Nikes from the other night. A very straight boy outfit. Though the same could be

said of much of my clothing. I'd only recently started adding more spice to my wardrobe. For years, I'd been too afraid to stand out around town. Too many assholes and conservatives. But I was about to start my final year of high school, and I didn't want to put my life on hold any longer to please people I never planned to see again come June.

"That was quick," I said, trying not to think about how Clay threw his arms around me in celebration last night after we destroyed Carrie and Jackson. Or that mouth-watering icy sweet cologne he wore. Or how we sat in one side of the tiny booth at Waffle House afterwards—paid for by Carrie and Jackson since they lost. Or the way our arms kept brushing together giving me goosebumps.

I mentally chastised myself for going there. As far as I knew, this boy was straight. I would not fantasize about those large hands and those big brown soulful eyes and that adorable, carefree grin. Not unless I got some evidence that he might return those feelings.

"We practically live in the same neighborhood," Clay marveled. "It's crazy how close we are and we've never met. We've probably gone past each other's houses a hundred times without even realizing."

"It's not that weird when you consider we go to different schools."

Clay pointed at me, his eyes going wide. "That's right! You and Carrie go to that swanky ass prep school, don't you? How is that?"

"It's probably a lot like your school, just with uniforms and more homework."

Clay chuckled lightly. "I'd never survive that. I barely get my homework done on time as it is."

As Clay's eyes scanned the room, I suddenly felt exposed. Like I'd opened my brain for him to examine what made me tick. Would he judge my taste in music and books? I was suddenly self-conscious of everything in the room, especially all the Taylor Swift vinyls I had on prominent display on top of the bookshelf that filled the entire back wall. Straight guys had a

tendency to look down on her, discrediting her abilities, claiming she only wrote songs about her relationships and her exes, as if that wasn't the subject of 90% of music, anyway.

Clay picked up the small Pride flag stuck in the typewriter-shaped pen holder on my desk. He waved it at me, grinning, before replacing it.

Was he giving me a clue? Or was I seriously reaching? I suspected the latter.

My chest tightened when Clay moved closer to the framed collage made up of miniature posters for my all-time favorite movies, organized into a rainbow. I was suddenly aware of how gay my room would look to a straight person. Was he even straight? Just because he had a girlfriend didn't mean he couldn't be into me. *Ay, there's the rub*. Because I couldn't be the person who knowingly got involved with someone else's person. Not after being jilted myself.

"This is so cool," Clay said, leaning closer to examine the tiny pictures. "Is that *Kiki's Delivery Service*?"

"Yeah."

"I love that movie! I watched it like a thousand times with my little sister when we were kids." Clay looked at me with unbridled glee. "Where'd you get this?"

I walked closer, hooking my fingers in the belt loops of my jeans. "Carrie made that for my last birthday."

"I'd love to have something like this. I'm obsessed with movies, but I've never gotten into buying posters because I can't commit to which ones I like the best. My favorites change all the time, depending on my mood." He waved his hands at the poster. "But this way you can have so many without wallpapering your whole room."

"Carrie loves doing stuff like this. I'm sure she'd make you one if you asked. She can probably also put them in like alphabetical order or by release date

if the rainbow is too... *flowery* for you."

"Nah. The rainbow is what makes it so cool and interesting. It's like a totally different image from far away."

Clay turned away from the poster to look around. "Your room is awesome. Everything is so fun and colorful. It has personality. Mine is so basic and boring. Kinda like me, I guess." He reached up to rub the back of his neck, flexing his bicep distractingly. The vein in his arm bulged, and I really wanted to reach out and run my finger across the length of it, following it under his shirt as far as I could.

God, I bet he looked great without a shirt. All muscly and tan. Or maybe he had a farmer's tan, which I could get on board with. He was hot enough to offset that.

Stop it!

Moving to the bookshelf, Clay traced the edge of the shelf with his index finger, examining the spines.

I wondered what he would think of all the gay books. My collection ranged from literary classics, like *Maurice* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to contemporary queer novels, like *Autoboyography* and *At the Edge of the Universe*, and even some graphic novels, like *Heartstopper*. I had a decent amount of books that featured straight people too, but they were mostly classics—Jane Austen, Shakespeare, the Brontës, Dickens, and the like.

Clay pulled out a book and examined the cover. He flipped it around to show me my copy of *They Both Die at the End*. "So, do they actually both die at the end?"

"If you want to know, read the book. You can borrow it, if you want. If you have a heart at all, it will probably make you cry."

Clay shrugged and returned the book to its slot. "Speaking of heartless. I talked to Summer."

"Who?"

He looked at me like I should know the name. "My girlfriend that I told you about."

"Oh." I didn't recall him ever mentioning a name. "What happened?"

"I told her how I felt." When Clay stuffed his hands in his pockets, I reminded myself not to look down at his very clingy shorts. "I said what you told me about how it's unfair of me to string her along when I don't feel the same way she does."

"How did she take it?"

"She thanked me for being honest," Clay said, a bit hesitantly. There was more that he wasn't telling.

"What else did she say?"

"She got kind of upset and said she wished I had told her all of this sooner."

"Hmm." I nodded. "Just imagine how bad it could've been if you had continued to ignore it."

"I know. Y-You were right about that, too."

"I'm assuming y'all broke up."

"Oh, yeah, totally. She bailed before I could even finish talking." He laughed. He didn't seem terribly broken up about it. Or maybe he was masking it. "That was right around the time I said I wanted us to stay friends."

I glared at him, incredulous. "Why the hell would you say that to her?"

"It's true!" Clay looked perplexed. He pulled his hands from his pockets—I was still not looking—and raised them at his sides. "I really liked her. Just not in a romantic kinda way."

"Okay, but that's not something you should say when you're trying to break up with someone. It's a terrible cliché, and no one ever means it."

Clay karate chopped the air, pointing all his fingers at me. "You told me to be honest with her, dude. That's *honestly* how I felt."

I clasped my hands on top of my head. "You have a lot to learn about women."

"How would you know?" Clay asked with a light chuckle. "You're gay."

I didn't take offense; I could tell Clay was being facetious. I had to learn a long time ago the difference between a friendly jab and a hateful comment masked in a joke. Clay meant no harm with his remark.

"I am gay. Which is why it's easier for me to know. I don't care about getting girls into bed, so I actually pay attention when they talk."

Clay made a strained face I didn't understand. He mumbled, "I pay attention when they talk."

My chest ached to see him in distress, so I switched topics: "So, where is this place you're taking me?"

Clay spun around, an easy smile stretching his lips. "It's a surprise."

Chapter 4 - Fearless

- *Emmett* -

Clay drove past the shopping center that popped up on the address he'd sent me. I looked around, wondering where exactly he was taking me. Maybe it was a bad idea to go off with a guy I barely knew. Mom was at work. No one even knew I had left home. I should have at least told Carrie. I was just so excited at the prospect of hanging out with him, it slipped my mind to be wary of him.

"Where are we going?" I asked. My stomach churned. This wouldn't be the first time someone lured me to a secluded place under false pretenses, only to lead me into a beating.

Clay glanced over, his brown eyes raking over me with what seemed to be concern. "Are you okay, dude? You look kinda pale."

"Where are we going?" I repeated, a bit more forcefully. I would not let another pretty face fool me.

"It's just right up here." Clay unfurled his index finger from the steering wheel to point straight ahead.

He turned onto a side street that curved around behind the strip mall.

My heart raced, my palms slick with sweat. It astounded me how fear and attraction caused the same physical response.

The bubble of fear choking off my breath shrunk when I saw the building ahead and read the sign out front. "Go-karts?"

Clay smiled. "I had a dream about them last night." There was a strange lilt to his voice. It must've been a pleasant dream. "I thought you might like it."

"I've never driven go-karts."

"What!" Clay stared at me, slack-jawed. "Dude, seriously?"

"I've never really been a car guy."

"You don't have to be a 'car guy' to enjoy a good adrenaline rush."

I already had one adrenaline rush today. I didn't know if I needed another, but Clay seemed so excited. And I wanted to make him happy. Because apparently I was a masochist.

Clay unhooked his seatbelt and opened his door. He paused with the door cracked. "Look, if you really don't want to do this, we can go somewhere else."

Shaking my head, I unfastened my seatbelt and opened the door. "Let's do this."

After Clay paid for our entry—he insisted—we passed by the large meeting room off to the side, full of rambunctious twelve-year-olds at a birthday party, stuffing their faces with hotdogs and pizza.

The attendant at the track wore a costume version of a NASCAR fire suit—I couldn't believe I actually knew the name of those damn things; I'd lived among straight people for too long. He read off a list of rules to the five people awaiting a car, including Clay and myself. The others were all kids whose parents waited at the railing with raised phones, taking photos and videos to capture the moment, rather than living it.

The man instructed everyone to put on their helmets as he helped each person into their car. I stared down at my helmet, wondering how many sweaty, lice-ridden heads had been in that thing.

"Do you want my hat?" Clay asked.

"What?" I looked at him.

Clay's brown eyes gleamed with amusement. "You're looking at that thing like it's going to give you a disease. I figured having something between it and your head would make you feel better."

I shrugged.

Clay removed his hat and ran a hand through his messy brown hair that was flattened against his head. Even with hat hair, he was sexy. It was so unfair.

Clay placed the hat on my head, smiling.

It was damp around the rim from sweat, which was gross, but it smelled like Clay, which was nice.

"It looks good on you."

I snorted.

Part of me was yelling, *Do not fall for this straight boy, dumbass!*

While another, smaller part whispered, *But what if he's not?*

I put on the helmet, which fit snugly with the hat beneath it. The little button on top of the hat pressed into my scalp uncomfortably.

Clay clapped me on the shoulder when it was my turn to load into a car. His smile was so bright and sincere, it actually made me smile a little.

After the first lap, which was nerve-racking with all the younger kids passing me by, I began to relax and enjoy myself. The buzz of the motor, the vibrations humming through my body. The wind whipping at my face. I jumped every time a car zoomed past with an ear-splitting roar, leaving the stench of burnt rubber and gasoline in their wake.

When our turn ended, Clay stood at the side of the track, offering a hand to help me out of the tiny car. It was harder getting out than in. My legs had jellified from the constant vibrations rattling my bones. Standing up, I got light-headed and tripped over the guardrail that all the children easily crossed without issue. Clay reached out for me, but he wasn't fast enough.

My knee connected with the pavement, sending a fiery pain shooting up my leg.

I cursed, which made the parents around us shoot daggers from their eyes.

Clay wrapped his arm around me to steady me as I stood up, his hand resting flat on my chest. He smelled so good. I took a good whiff while I had the opportunity.

"You okay?" Clay asked with a laugh.

I pulled free of Clay's hold, straightening my posture. "Fine," I blurted, adjusting my shirt.

Clay made a concerned face, looking down at something. He pushed my shoulders to make me sit back on the railing and knelt down to examine the prefabricated tear in my jeans over my knee. The frayed edges were tinged with red. As soon as I was aware of the wound, it started to sting.

Clay stretched the material, a deep line forming between his brows. He bent forward and gently blew on the raw skin. His breath was cool and soothing.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"My mom always did this whenever I hurt myself as a kid. It always made it feel better." Clay's thick lashes flicked up as his big brown eyes met my gaze. "Did it work?"

Why are you so fucking adorable?

I couldn't say that to him, so I pressed my lips together and nodded.

We returned the helmets to the check-in, and Clay said, "I'm starving. How about you?"

"I guess I could eat." I didn't mention that I ate breakfast an hour before Clay picked me up.

"Got any particular taste you want?"

"We could steal some pizza from the sixth graders back there."

Clay laughed. "I think we can do better than cold pizza."

"What did you have in mind?"

"You good with Mexican food?"

"It's my favorite."

Clay's lips slid into that easygoing grin. So painfully charming. "You and me, we're just like—" Clay raised his hand to show his crossed fingers "—so in sync."

I gave a small shake of my head when Clay turned to walk down the ramp to the parking lot. Clay might never cause me physical pain, as I had briefly worried, but I could not say the same about the emotional kind, which in my experience had a much more long-lasting effect.

Chapter 5 - The Way You Make Me Feel

- *Clay* -

"You don't have a boyfriend, right?" I asked. I pushed an entire tortilla chip loaded with salsa into my mouth. Jackson told me Emmett had a date to bowling the other night, but the guy flaked at the last minute. My heart actually broke a little for Emmett hearing that. It was no wonder he didn't put up with my shitty attitude.

Emmett shook his head. He was still wearing my hat. It looked great on him. Better than it ever did on me. I didn't have the heart to ask for it back yet. If it hadn't belonged to my dad, I would let him keep it.

"So what's that like?" I asked.

"Not having a boyfriend?"

"Being with a guy. Is it different than with a girl?" I couldn't believe I just asked that. Out loud. To his face. Was that too intrusive? Would he get offended? Maybe he didn't talk about that kind of thing.

"I wouldn't really know. The only girl I ever kissed was Carrie."

My mouth dropped open from shock. "You and Carrie dated?"

"God, no!" Emmett let out a harsh laugh. "We were like eleven, trying to practice kissing so we didn't suck when the real thing happened. The whole thing was a disaster. We were both awkward and fumbly. A wire broke on her braces and sliced my lip." He pulled his bottom lip down to show a dark line. "Three stitches."

I laughed. I could just imagine little Emmett, the same green eyes and black hair clumsily trying to kiss Carrie under her mass of dirty blonde curls.

"I won't judge the whole female population on that experience," Emmett said, dunking a chip into the queso dip, "but I never was attracted to girls."

"When did you know you were—" I paused and looked around. I didn't know how open Emmett was about being gay; I didn't want anyone to overhear, just in case.

I turned back to meet Emmett's green eyes. He had his brows raised.

"I've known for a long time." Emmett said. "But, officially, I accepted it at Bobby Thomas's twelfth birthday party. He was very cute. It was a pool party, and I kept finding myself staring at him. He caused my very first boner. Thank God I was in the pool so nobody could tell."

I choked on the chip I'd just tried to swallow. I held a napkin to my face as I coughed, then gulped down half of my water before the fit subsided.

Emmett just smiled at me from across the table, amused. He had a fantastic smile, even if he didn't show it often. It kind of made them more precious.

"You okay?" Emmett asked. "Do you need me to Heimlich you?"

I patted my chest and gave a thumbs up, not quite fully recovered.

Emmett folded his arms on the table. His face shifted, becoming slightly more serious than before. "How about you?"

I glanced around the room again and back to Emmett. "My first boner?"

Emmett chuckled. "Not what I meant. But sure."

I wondered what he meant. What could he possibly be asking?

Pushing past my confusion, I shrugged. "I don't even remember the first one. Just that it started happening a lot in sixth grade. And at the most inconvenient and random times. Like right in the middle of a math test, like I was horny for fractions or something."

Emmett nodded. "Well, sure. All that *looong* division. And all those numbers... going into other numbers." He paused and shrugged. "Okay. I'm out of math innuendos."

"I was very embarrassed about it. Until—"

"Until what?"

I leaned forward, feeling heat rise in my chest. "Until I learned what to do with it."

"A glorious day for every young man. It's like the only bright side of going through puberty."

Emmett was so easy to talk to. I could never discuss this kind of stuff with anyone else. My friends would brazenly talk about sex, and porn, and jerking off right at the lunch table in the middle of the cafeteria where anyone could hear. I was always too embarrassed. I might nod along with something someone said, but I never spoke up or added my input.

But Emmett made me feel comfortable, relaxed. I don't know how he did that.

"Getting taller was pretty cool, too." I said.

"Unless you stopped growing at 5'8."

"Please, I'm only three inches taller than you. That's not a big deal."

"Three inches can make a big difference." Emmett flashed a devilish grin.

My face went red again when I realized what he was implying.

Emmett laughed. "You should see your face right now."

The waiter brought out our food. Thank God. Emmett's fajitas sizzled and popped, smoke wafting off the top. They smelled amazing. I wished I got that instead of boring tacos. I loved these tacos, but I got them every time I came here.

Emmett noticed me staring. "Do you want one?" He held out the foil package of tortillas.

"You don't mind?"

Emmett shook his head. "I can never eat the whole thing. I always fill up on chips, and usually end up taking half of it for a midnight snack."

I grabbed a tortilla. "Can you just scoop some on for me?"

"Tell me when," Emmett said. He shoveled a pile of grilled chicken and vegetables onto the tortilla.

"Whoa!" I held up my free hand. "That's probably too much."

"Amateur." Emmett scoffed. "I load mine down until they're practically falling apart."

I swiped a butter knife through the tiny container of guacamole that Emmett offered and spread it down one side of the tortilla before rolling it up and taking a bite. I leaned forward as the filling spilled out onto the table, grunting in distress.

This caused Emmett to laugh. Which made it worth the trouble.

"Is it good?" he asked.

I nodded, still chewing.

Chapter 6 - Jump Then Fall

- *Emmett* -

When Clay started asking all those questions about my sexuality, I wondered if this was his way of saying it *without saying it*. It could be hard knowing who to trust in such a provincial town. Simply saying the words out loud was terrifying sometimes. Even to someone who would undoubtedly offer support.

I tried to pry subtly. But subtlety wasn't one of my strengths, so Clay missed the point altogether. Although it was cute to see him getting so flustered.

Back at my house, Clay stopped me before I got out of the car with a hand on my arm. "Wait."

Hope blossomed in my chest. Was this the moment I'd hoped for when I agreed to this outing. "Yeah?"

Then it came crashing down. Clay pointed at my head. "My hat."

"Oh." I took it off and handed it back. I pushed the door open and stepped out. "Well, bye."

After I closed the door, the window rolled down with a low mechanical whir. Clay leaned across the passenger seat, the hat back in its rightful home. It looked so much better on him. "I had a great time, Emmett."

"Me, too."

"We should do that again." It sounded more like a question. As if he weren't sure that we should.

"Go-karts and Mexican?"

Clay laughed and threw up his hand. "Or mini golf and pizza—which is neither cold, nor stolen from twelve-year-olds. Maybe a hike and a hoagie."

"Sounds fun."

"I'll call you."

I nodded. "Do that."

Clay gave a half-wave as the window slid up.

I stood on the curb and waved as Clay drove away. I waited until the little white Honda turned the corner before I crossed the street to Carrie's house.

Her Miata was in the driveway, so I didn't bother knocking. "Honey, I'm home!" I called out.

"Hi, Em," Carrie's mom called out from somewhere deep in the house. "Carrie's out back, by the pool."

"Thanks, Mom."

Obviously, she wasn't really my mom, but she may as well have been. The Herreras had lived across the street from us since before I could remember. Carrie and her mother were a constant fixture in my life. Carrie and I had been inseparable since our first play date. Over the years, we'd bonded over being the only children of single, career-driven mothers. The proximity helped too. Our mothers were also extremely close. I used to wish they were lesbians—or at least bi—so they could get married and we could be a family, then Carrie and I could live in the same house and actually be related.

"Anytime, *mijo* ," Dr. Herrera said.

Carrie was in the pool, laid out on an inflatable pink lounge, letting her hand drift through the water as she floated aimlessly. Her bronze skin glistening from sunscreen. She didn't look like she'd even touched the water. Her hair and bikini were both bone dry.

"You're looking lovely today, Care."

Carrie pushed her sunglasses off her eyes and lifted her head to look at me.
"And you're being unusually nice today, Emmie."

I took a seat at the edge of the pool and rolled up my pant legs. I removed my shoes and socks to dip my feet into the water. It was bracing at first, icy cold. Being so hot out, the chill was nice. I had a love/hate relationship with summertime. I longed for it during school, but I detested the sweltering heat and humidity. And sweating, most of all. Although the hot guys that jogged through our neighborhood shirtless almost made up for the downsides.

"What happened to your knee?"

"I fell. Scraped it."

Thinking back to Clay blowing on my knee, looking up at me with that sweet grin and those brown eyes, gave me a bit of glee.

Carrie returned the glasses to shade her eyes and stared up at the clear blue sky. "Just a heads up. That guy from bowling the other night asked me for your number. You know, the one you betrayed me over and went all Ides of March on me, Brutus? Not that I'm bitter or anything."

"Need I remind you, dear Ceasar, you and your boyfriend put me on his team."

I actually came here to tell her all about today. I wanted to get her thoughts on it. She probably knew Clay fairly well, since he was her boyfriend's best friend. I told everything that happened. Carrie listened, her mouth gaping wider with every word.

"Do you think he likes you?" she asked.

"He just broke up with his girlfriend," I said with a shrug.

"Are you saying that because you think that means he's straight? Or because that means he's another guy on the rebound?"

Another shrug, with a headshake thrown in for good measure.

"The answer to the first is you can never know that for sure unless you ask," Carrie said, holding up one finger. Which was an excellent point. I could guess and look for clues all I wanted, but only Clay could answer that question.

Carrie held up a second finger. "The answer to the second... more complicated. Especially after my disastrous attempt at matchmaking."

I reached down and flicked water at her. "I'm over Tanner."

Carrie huffed, brushing the droplets off her leg. "Yeah. *Okay* ." She clearly didn't believe me. I didn't blame her. I had a tendency to wallow in bad news, wrapping it around my heart like a blanket until I was miserable.

Wiping away the sweat beading on my forehead, I stood up and stripped off my shirt. "Move over, I'm coming in."

Carrie paddled her raft out of my path.

I removed my jeans and tossed them out of the splash zone. Boxer briefs were just as good as a bathing suit. And her mom wouldn't care.

I ran and jumped into the deep end. The frigid water stabbed at my skin in such a satisfying way, although it did sting the cut on my knee a bit at first. I stayed under for as long as I could until my lungs burned. I kicked off from the bottom and rocketed to the surface, gasping for breath in the fresh air.

"I give it a five for form, Bob," Carrie said, affecting the tone of a bored sportscaster. "He's done much better in past performances."

I slapped the water. "Fuck! There goes my Olympic dreams."

"Sorry 'bout it. The panel has to remain impartial. No matter how much the judges adore you."

I released an exaggerated sigh. "Fair enough."

When my jeans dinged a few minutes later, I climbed out of the pool and went over to check my phone, gingerly slipping it from the pocket to avoid wetting my pants too much. It was just a number. No name. I tapped the text to open my message app.

My heart skipped a beat as my eyes scrolled across the words, seeing the messages above, realizing who this was from.

CLAY: *What r u doin tomorrow?*

EMMETT: *I don't know. What are we doing?*

Panic immediately set in after I hit send. That was too presumptuous. Using "we," like we were a couple.

CLAY: 😊

The dots appeared again. My pulse pounded as I waited for Clay to send whatever he was typing.

CLAY: *How do u feel abt 4-wheelers?*

"Ew."

"What?" Carrie asked.

I shook my head as I typed.

EMMETT: *Are you trying to kill me?*

CLAY: 😊

CLAY: *It's really fun. If u don't kno how to ride or ur nervous u can ride w me.*

I could picture it perfectly: clinging tight to Clay, my chest pressed against his back as my arms wrapped around him. I could bury my face in his neck—get a good whiff of that cologne, probably mixed with sweat—and pretend it was because I was scared of falling off.

I was getting a little too excited by the idea. Especially since I was only wearing underwear, which would hide nothing.

I didn't know how much time I spent fantasizing, but it must've been a decent chunk, because my phone dinged again.

CLAY: ???

I turned to Carrie for some sage advice. "Is it bad to try to date a boy if I don't know if he's into guys?"

"I don't think so. It only gets gross if you continue to pursue him once you're sure he's not."

I nodded. That logic seemed sound. I really didn't know if Clay was one hundred percent straight. Having girlfriends didn't prevent him from also liking guys. Liking me?

Biting my lip, I wrote back.

EMMETT: *You better not let me fall off.*

CLAY: *Never.*

CLAY: 😊

I dropped the phone onto the chair and turned back to the pool, diving in headfirst.

Breaking through the surface, I wiped my face, slicking my hair back.

Carrie cupped her hands around her mouth, making cheering crowd noises. Mimicking the sports announcer again, she said, "He's done it, folks. What a comeback. A real Cinderella story. It makes even this black-hearted bastard want to cry."

I pumped my fist in the air. "That's what I'm talking about."

Chapter 7 - Well I Wonder

- *Clay* -

My mom walked into my room, carrying a laundry basket. "What are you so smiley about?" she asked.

I pressed my phone against my chest, clutching my hands over it. I'd just finished rereading the messages me and Emmett exchanged that afternoon for the fifth time.

I'd read them like an epic short story. It started with a question: "What are you doing tomorrow?" The one I agonized over sending for ten minutes. Before my body rebelled. Acting on its own, my finger hit send before my brain could determine if it was a good idea. I'd just walked in the door after spending two hours with the guy. It seemed too soon. Pushy, even.

Then the reply came. "I don't know. What are we doing?"

We.

Emmett said "we."

Not you. Not I. We .

As if it was a forgone conclusion that we should do something together. That singular word still gave me goosebumps.

The smile emoji was a lame attempt at showing how much I appreciated the sentiment, but I didn't know if it came across. Or if it was just stupid. It was probably stupid.

The offer of ATV riding went out, and I waited patiently for a response.

"Are you trying to kill me?" Emmett's words made me laugh the first time. And every time I read it afterwards.

But worry infected me. Maybe Emmett didn't like ATVs or off-roading. I had been doing it for years with my friends. But Emmett was more refined than my friends. He had a softness about him. And somewhat contradictorily, a hard shell. It couldn't be easy growing up gay in a town like ours. If he was going out on dates in public, he must be out to a degree. I wanted to ask so many questions about his experiences. But I got self-conscious and couldn't bring myself to do it.

Afraid that Emmett might renege, I wrote a quick reply to offer some prodding in the hopes that he would take the bait. I told him it was fun. I even offered to let him ride along with me. The thought made me smile, imagining Emmett clinging to me for dear life, arms wrapped tight around my waist. It was always fun when we brought someone new around for the first time: friends, girlfriends, siblings. There was a bit of ribbing at the beginning before they got comfortable on the ATVs, but they always had fun.

I had stared at the screen, anxiously. Had the offer worked? Would it be enough to hook Emmett?

With a fresh wave of courage, I typed a series of question marks to regain Emmett's attention. I immediately regretted it, feeling pushy.

Another interminable stretch of nothingness later, the dots appeared, and Emmet said, "You better not let me fall off."

That brought the biggest smile to my face, stretching my lips to their limits. "Never," I said, adding a winking emoji. That was probably too much. Again. It's like I had forgotten how to talk to people.

Mom removed my clean clothes from the basket, giving a knowing grin. "Is that a girl?"

"What?" My eyes snapped up to meet hers. "It's just a friend."

"I've never seen any of your friends make you blush before," she said with a light chuckle.

I shook my head. "No. It's not... It's nothing."

"If you say so." She tucked the basket under her arm and left, closing the door behind her.

I lifted the phone and stared at the messages. I licked my lips, contemplating my mother's words. Why did these messages give me such satisfaction? Why did I keep poring over them?

I closed the app and put my phone to sleep, tossing it to the foot of the bed next to the stacks of folded clothes.

She didn't know what she was talking about.

Chapter 8 - It's Nice to Have a Friend

- *Emmett* -

My phone started ringing at an unreasonably early hour for a Friday morning during the summer. What kind of monster would rob me of my precious sleep? I rolled over and stuffed a pillow over my head.

When the ringing ceased, I heard a text notification. I shrieked as I threw off my covers and crossed the room to my desk, where the phone was charging. I made a habit of keeping it across the room for those days when I needed to set an alarm. If it wasn't out of reach, I'd hit snooze at least five times before the alarm finally got to me. This way, I had no choice but to get up.

Tapping it to illuminate the screen, I saw that the call and the text were from Clay. My mind cleared up like I'd just shotgunned an espresso.

CLAY: *R u still up 4 hanging out?*

My eyes drifted up to the time, 7:48. As much as I wanted to crawl back into bed and bury myself deep within the covers, I wanted to see Clay more.

EMMETT: ✓

CLAY: *B there n 5*

I rushed around to gather an outfit. What does one wear for a day of riding four-wheelers? I knew enough to suspect we'd be getting dirty, so I grabbed the jeans I wore yesterday—still bloodstained—and threw on a plain blue t-shirt that I had no attachment to. I slipped my feet into my old hiking boots, not wanting to risk any of my good shoes with the possibility of mud.

Clay announced his arrival by text. He said he didn't want to wake anyone.

"Except me," I mumbled to myself on the way downstairs.

I smelled coffee, which meant Mom was awake. "I'm going out," I yelled.

Mom hurried from the kitchen, still wearing her pajamas. "Where?"

"Riding ATVs."

She snorted. "No, seriously."

I glared at her. "I am serious. My new friend invited me."

Her head reared back, looking over my outfit. "Have I met this friend?"

"I only just met him."

"You know the rules, Em. You don't get into cars with people I haven't met."

I rolled my eyes, not mentioning the fact that I'd already been in his car without her knowledge. That was not the way to engender trust. "Hold on."

It's not like I didn't understand why she had that rule. She had a very good reason for it, given my history of misplacing trust.

I stepped outside. Clay waved from his car, smiling brightly. I beckoned for him.

Clay's face fell as he got out. He jogged up the front sidewalk. He wore an outfit almost identical to mine, except for the color of his t-shirt (red) and the bleached out jeans. The splotchy stains and random tears didn't look factory-made. He came by that wear-and-tear honestly.

"What's up?" Clay asked, hooking his thumbs in his back pockets. It made his shirt pull tight across his chest.

"My mom won't let me go unless she meets you."

Clay blew out a breath, relaxing his shoulders. "Oh. Okay. That's cool."

"Not really." I waved for him to follow.

"It is to me. I thought you were gonna cancel." His bright voice made me hate this a little less.

Mom waited inside. She'd put on a robe over her pajamas and pulled her black hair into a ponytail. I introduced them.

Clay just stood there excitedly, beaming. He was such a puppy with those wide brown eyes and open smile. A floppy-haired labrador. That's what he was.

"How long have you had your license, Clay?" Mom asked.

"Almost two years. And I had my learner's permit a year before that."

"Any speeding tickets?"

Clay barked out a laugh. His face instantly shifted into a look of contrition, as if he'd done something wrong. He shook his head vigorously. "No, ma'am. My parents said they'd take my car if I got even one ticket."

Mom nodded. She looked over at me. "That's a good rule."

I twisted my lips to the side. I didn't need her getting any more ideas on how to be overprotective. She barely let me drive as it was, and February would mark two years of having that useless hunk of plastic. To be fair, I did nearly back into a UPS truck. And I almost had a head-on collision with a gas pump. Turns out, belting "You Can't Stop the Beat," while pulling into a gas station, not ideal.

"Can we go?" I asked.

Mom turned a stony glare on me, letting me know she wasn't done. She turned kinder eyes to Clay. "Will there be drinking out there?"

Clay's mouth hung open for a second. Judging by his face, I suspected the answer was yes. But Clay had a brilliant response, "I can't promise no one there will drink, but I can promise that I won't."

His eyes went wide for a second, then he added, " We won't."

Mom nodded, sipping her coffee. She didn't show it, but I could tell she appreciated the answer.

After a bit more interrogation, Mom said, "Alright, you can go."

Clay clapped his hands together, ecstatic at this news. "Thank you, ma'am."

I grabbed Clay's wrist and dragged him to the door before my mother could think up any more questions.

Once we got in the car, I looked Clay over. "So, there's going to be other people with us?"

Spending the day with a bunch of dude-bros guzzling beer and bragging about "banging chicks" wasn't my idea of a good time. Not to mention the casual use of gay slurs that straight guys threw out around here to insult each other's masculinity.

Clay nodded, pausing at the stop sign at the end of my street. "Did I not mention that?"

I wondered if it was too late to back out. I could get out now and walk back to my house. "Like who?"

"Just my friends. I doubt you know most of them. But Jackson will be there."

That made me feel marginally better. Jackson knew my sexuality, and he'd never shown issue with it. Of course, I had never spent more than five minutes alone with him without Carrie being in the near vicinity.

Clay must have read my expression, because he said, "If you aren't having fun, or if you feel uncomfortable, just let me know and we can bail."

"You'd do that? Blow off your friends?"

Clay seemed baffled by his question. "I invited you out to have fun. I don't want you to be miserable. That defeats the purpose."

I got stuck on the "invited you out" part of that statement. The wording was too vague to read much into it. It could definitely be taken as platonic. Or the other thing. The thing I wouldn't let myself say. Not even in my own head.

"Oh! We can even have a secret code to let me know you want to leave." Clay said, grinning like this was the best idea ever.

His enthusiasm made me crack a smile. "What'd you have in mind, Double-Oh-Seven?"

That made Clay incredibly happy. "When you're ready to go, just catch my eye and do this." He raised two fingers and brushed them down the side of his nose.

"What if I just have an itch?" I asked.

"Are you going to stare into my eyes when you get an itch?"

"I might. You don't know." I was being needlessly difficult, which was totally on brand for me.

"Fine. Do the nose thing, then cross your eyes for a second. How's that?"

I gave a salute. Doing my best Judi Dench impression, I said, "Mission accepted, Mr. Bond."

"You're so dumb," Clay said. He pressed his lips together to hide his amusement.

I got distracted when the radio switched from Journey's "Any Way You Want It" to Nina Simone's "I Put A Spell On You." And not just because it was such a weird transition. I never would have expected him to be a fan of hers. It surprised me even more when he started singing along. He actually had a pretty decent voice, it was just the lyrics he was singing. Mostly, the

part where he looked over at me, sort of half-grinning as he and Nina sang,
" *I put a spell on you, because you're mine.* "

He had to be doing that on purpose. Right?

I didn't know how to feel hearing him say that while looking into my eyes.

That was not true. I knew how I felt. I just couldn't let *him* know how I felt.
Which was why I gripped my hands around my phone, holding it over my
lap, trying to conjure the most unsexy thoughts to make me go soft again.

How did he keep doing this to me?

Chapter 9 - Hold On

- *Clay* -

I pulled the car off to the side of the road, next to the open paddock gate. Emmett pointed out the "No Trespassing" sign on the gate.

I waved off the concern. "The land belongs to my friend's family. They have a full off-roading course built out here. We do this all the time."

"What are we waiting for then?"

I pointed to the truck coming down the road. "That."

Brandon's brand new cherry red Chevy Silverado slowed to a stop to make the turn onto the narrow dirt road. The truck hauled a long trailer with four ATVs and two dirt bikes on the back.

I looked over at Emmett. His lips were tight, his brows hanging low.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Emmett looked at me. "Fine."

I could tell that was a lie. "Are you sure?"

Emmett gave a tight nod. "Just a little nervous."

I rubbed his arm. "It's fine. I know what I'm doing. I won't let you get hurt."

He nodded again.

I worried there was something more going on, but I couldn't do anything to help if he wouldn't fess up.

Once Brandon had passed, I pulled onto the dirt road, following the truck. I still couldn't believe his parent bought him that for his sixteenth birthday without blinking an eye. My parents made me get something practical and fuel efficient. That's how I ended up with a Honda Civic. But I wouldn't complain. Any car was better than no car. It was definitely better than Tyler's 1985 Ford pickup.

The car rocked as we drove down the bumpy road. I kept a slow, steady pace, unlike Brandon who barreled ahead without a care, hitting every mud hole and dip in the road. I could imagine my friends whooping and hollering in the truck. Emmett was not so thrilled. He had a white knuckle grip on the door handle, his other hand pressed to the roof.

"Try not to barf on the upholstery," I said with a laugh.

Emmett grimaced at me, which just made me laugh harder.

As soon as I parked in the large clearing, Emmett jumped out. He walked off to the side and doubled over, holding his hands to his thighs.

While the other guys unloaded the ATVs, I went over to lay a hand on Emmett's back, rubbing circles between his shoulder blades. "You okay?"

"Have you ever seen the movie *Vertigo* ?"

I shook my head. Realizing Emmett couldn't see me, I said, "No."

"Let's just say I know how Jimmy Stewart felt now."

I didn't know that name. I'd have to look it up later, along with that movie. I wanted to understand Emmett's reference better.

"You could've told me you get carsick." There really wasn't much I could have done about it. I took the road as carefully as I could manage.

Emmett glanced up with irritation, drawing up his features. "I never have before."

"Sorry."

"Clay!"

My friends crowded around the ATVs. Jackson had also arrived while I wasn't looking. He must have turned in right after us. Everything was ready to go. They held their arms out. Jackson tapped his watch.

I waved them off. "Y'all go ahead. We'll catch up."

Brandon, Tyler, and Mark each took one 4-wheeler. Jackson opted for a dirt bike. They took off on the trail, leaving behind a 4-wheeler and a dirt bike for us to choose from.

Emmet took a few deep breaths, straightening his posture.

"You better?"

Emmett nodded.

"Do you think you can handle the trail? It gets kinda rough out there in spots."

"I told you I'm good," Emmett said.

My friends' shouts of revelry echoed through the woods, along with the roars of their machines.

I raised a brow. "Well, I'd rather not have you puke down my back."

"I'll be fine," Emmett assured me.

"Okay." I gestured toward the ATV. I preferred dirt bikes, but I'd never take a passenger on one through this course.

After getting our helmets on, Emmett stared at me. I was already seated. "What's wrong?"

Emmett shook his head. He grabbed my shoulder to assist him as he climbed on the back, his knees pressing into my thighs.

I turned my head, even though I couldn't see much of Emmett with the helmet in the way. "If you need to stop, just tap my stomach twice."

"Your stomach?" He sounded confused.

"You gotta put your arms around me. Your hands will be on my stomach."

"Right." Emmett leaned forward, holding onto my hips. "I knew that."

I huffed and grabbed Emmett's wrists, pulling him forward until his chest was against my back, placing his hands on my stomach. "Hold on tight. I don't want you flying off the back. I think your mom might murder me if I bring you back in less than pristine condition."

Emmett laughed, but it didn't sound genuine. "Probably."

"Just don't squeeze too tight. If I tap you, I need you to give me slack. Okay?"

"Okay."

"And listen, I'm not gonna go too hard, but just in case we start to tip, you haul ass and bail off. Got it?"

"Jesus fucking Christ!"

I laughed. "It's not too late to change your mind."

He tapped my stomach. "Let's go."

"Okay." I started the engine and revved it up a few times before squeezing the accelerator.

Emmett grabbed on tighter as we shot forward. I held my bottom lip between my teeth, pleased by his reaction.

I avoided the first few holes and hills, weaving through the obstacles to stay on flat ground to let him adjust to the speed.

"Hold on," I yelled as we headed toward a small hill that was unavoidable. We barely left the ground, but Emmett pressed his chest against my back, tightening his arms around me. It wasn't unbearable, so I let him keep his firm grip. If it made Emmett feel better, what was the harm?

I took the first turn to bypass the rocky path up ahead that I usually traveled. There were a few small logs this way, but they were spaced far enough apart that Emmett could handle it.

I kept to the minor obstacles, avoiding the advanced stuff that shouldn't be attempted with a passenger. My friends totally would've done them regardless to shake up the newbie. Part of the initiation.

When we took a slightly larger hill, Emmett gripped my shirt in his fists, pressing his whole body right up against me. My eyes widened, feeling the stiff bulge against my lower back. He was hard. Oh my God! My chest tightened—so did the front of my jeans—as my breathing grew stilted.

Did I like that?

It had to be the vibrations of the ATV. But if that were the case, why didn't it happen until I felt Emmett against me? And why was I suddenly thinking about Emmett's hands drifting further down? What might happen if they did? What if I just pulled over right here?

No one would know.

My friends never took this route. They called it Pussy Pass. They mercilessly mocked anyone who took this path. I took it for Emmett's sake, but they never would.

If I stopped right now, I could just turn around, take off Emmett's helmet and just press my lips to his, letting my hand drift between us to feel him, to have him feel me.

When the trees thinned, I snapped out of my reverie. The paths merged up ahead. We would catch up to my friends soon enough. I couldn't be thinking about this kind of crap around them. They would know. They would see it

in my eyes or something. They'd be able to tell that I was fantasizing about giving a hand job to another guy. I had to shake this before we got back to the clearing.

Chapter 10 - I Knew You Were Trouble

- *Emmett* -

After we returned to the clearing where everyone parked, Clay cut the engine and immediately jumped off the ATV. He hung his helmet on the handlebar and raced over to join his friends, throwing a look over his shoulder at me, a deep crease of concern between his brows. He pressed his lips into such a tight line; it looked like he didn't have any.

I sighed, my heart heavy. Clay felt it. I was afraid he might when it happened, but I had no control of it. I never should have squeezed him so tight. I only did it because I was terrified I would fall off when Clay took that one hill. Would he believe it was the vibration of the ATV that caused it? Not the truth—that I'd been fantasizing about him the whole time I had my arms around him.

Jackson hopped up in the truck bed and opened an ice chest. He passed out cans of beer. "Yo, Clay. Want one?"

Clay glanced back at me before turning to Jackson, nodding.

Jackson tossed the can. Clay caught it easily. I wouldn't begrudge Clay this. I could drive his car and then walk home. He had pointed out his house this morning. It wasn't even a mile from my house. If I cut through the huge cement drainage ditch that stretched through the neighborhood, I could be home in ten minutes. I could make up a story about why I was walking home.

"Emmett!" Jackson raised a beer in question.

I shook my head as I neared the group, rubbing my hand up and down my arm.

Clay moved farther away as if we were two magnets, repelling each other, unable to connect. He wouldn't even look at me now.

I really hoped he didn't freak out too much. Even if he didn't want me the way I wanted him to, I still wanted him as a friend. He was such a sweet guy, and he made me want to open up. So few people did that for me. The list pretty much consisted of Carrie, Dr. Herrera, and my mom. Although there was a lot my mom and the good doctor didn't know. And if I had my way, my mom wouldn't find out any of it until it was too late for her to ground me.

"Look at this asshole, showing up late," Jackson said as a silver SUV pulled into the clearing.

"As usual," said the blond boy standing next to Clay—Jackson called him Brandon when offering him a beer. His teeth were too white and even though his clothes were just as tattered as the others, his jeans had a Diesel tag and his shirt was Ralph Lauren. He was the one driving that gas guzzling monstrosity we followed back here.

I was barely paying attention to any of them. I didn't care about them or the newcomer and his apparent chronic lateness. All I cared about was catching Clay's eye to make sure things wouldn't be weird between us. He just stood there, staring at his unopened beer can pensively.

"Did you dickheads start without me?" the new guy asked.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, but I wasn't sure why.

"Relax. We just did one lap," Brandon said. "You can get in on the next one."

"Beer, Duke?" Jackson asked.

Duke must have agreed because a beer can flew across the space, startling me to take a step back.

They all laughed. I thought for a moment that they were laughing at my reaction, but one of the unnamed guys—the stout one with a shock of orangish-red hair—said, "Good thing you're not a receiver, butterfingers. Otherwise our team would be fucked."

"Fuck you, Mark. Linebackers are a dime a dozen." That voice sounded vaguely familiar. It wasn't deep enough to be Jackson. Nor the raspiness of Brandon. And it definitely wasn't the honey sweet tone of Clay's voice.

I looked over at the new guy. An icicle stabbed through my heart at the sight of the dark-skinned Adonis with the chiseled jawline. "Alfie?" The name slipped from my lips before I could stop myself.

They all looked at me, but I was staring at my ex-boyfriend. My very closeted ex-boyfriend.

"Who the fuck is Alfie?" asked the gangly boy, wearing a camouflage shirt and matching hat.

"Christ, Tyler!" Brandon smacked the back of Camo Boy's head. "Duke's first name is Alfonso, dumbass."

"Since when?"

"Hey, dude. Long time, no see." Alfie said, as if we barely knew each other. As if he hadn't taken my virginity. As if he hadn't shattered my heart.

I forced a nod. I wasn't even sure my head actually moved enough to be perceptible. I could barely breathe. I couldn't blink at all as water seeped around the edge of my eyes. Contrarily, Alfie seemed great. He looked great. Hotter than ever. His muscles had grown some. He'd traded his flattop for a shaved head, and his face had cleared up a lot since I last saw him. That was almost a year ago.

"Motherfucker!" Clay yelled.

Everyone's attention shifted to him. His beer spouted out a stream of foam. "You asshole." He glared over at Jackson. "You did that on purpose."

Jackson held up his hands. "It wasn't me. It must've got shook up in the cooler."

Clay held the beer at arm's length, letting the overflow pour into the grass. "I can't drink this. It's all fucking foam."

"Want another one?" Jackson asked.

"Nah." Clay set the can on the rail of the trailer and flicked his hand to clear off the excess liquid. "I'm good."

Clay finally looked at me. His eyes stuck on me.

I did our secret sign, hoping Clay would still be willing to leave his friends for my sake. I couldn't stay here with Alfie. Or was it Duke now?

Clay pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Shit! My mom just texted. She needs me back home."

"You only got to do one lap," Mark said.

Clay shrugged. "She pays for my car insurance and gas. Can't say no."

I released the breath I'd been holding. Even if Clay never spoke to me again after today, I would still be eternally grateful to him for keeping his word in this moment.

"Sorry, Emmett," Clay said. "We gotta go."

I nodded and walked toward him.

"Hey, Emmett," Jackson called. "If you want to stay, I can drive you home."

I knew Jackson was only trying to be nice, including me, but I really wanted to punch him in the face for the offer. Couldn't he see I was on the verge? Honestly, I hoped he couldn't. Because that would mean Alfie couldn't see it either. I didn't want him to have the satisfaction of knowing he could still get to me, even after this long.

"That's okay," I squeaked out. My voice sounded so weak. "Thanks though."

Jackson's eyes jumped to Alfie/Duke. He nodded, a knowing look on his face. He seemed to realize there was something else going on.

"Tell Carrie I'll come by later," Jackson said.

"Sure." I rushed toward Clay's car.

"Are you okay?" Clay asked when we got our doors closed.

"Please, just drive before I burst into tears in front of your friends."

Clay nodded and cranked the car. He whipped the car around, like this was one of those stupid *Fast & Furious* movies, and sped down the road. I barely noticed the bumps this time. I was already reeling from seeing Alfie.

"What happened?"

"I can't talk about it," I said.

I wouldn't out Alfie. No matter how heartless he'd been to me when he abruptly stopped talking to me just after our four-month anniversary.

"Did he bully you or something?" Clay asked. "He can be a dick sometimes."

"He didn't bully me. Although he did utterly destroy my soul."

I should not have said that.

Clay narrowed his eyes beneath deeply furrowed brows as he watched the road. His face suddenly shifted, his features stretching into a mask of awareness. He glanced at me. "Were you guys—"

I closed my eyes, leaning my head against the headrest. I'd already said too much.

"I never would've guessed that Duke is gay."

"He's not gay," I spat.

Honestly, I didn't know how Alfie identified. He said he liked girls, and he certainly seemed to like me. But I would not say any of that. I still felt like I needed to protect Alfie. It might be stupid, but I would want the same consideration if I were in his position.

"But you hooked up? Dated?"

I rolled my eyes, propping my arm on the door, covering my mouth with my hand. "Why do you care? Is this going to change how you see him?"

"I don't know. I've never been through this kind of thing."

"He's still Al—" I paused to correct myself, because he wasn't Alfie to Clay
"—Duke."

"I know that. I just mean that when you learn something about a person, it can change your perception of them. That doesn't mean it's a negative change, but this is a huge thing I just learned."

I turned to glare at Clay. "You didn't learn anything. I didn't say anything."

"I'm not going to go up to him and say I know, if that's what you're worried about."

I shook my head. I didn't know how to feel right now. I hated Alfie, but I also kind of still loved him. How twisted was that?

"Emmett." Clay's voice sounded far away.

"What?" I snapped. I didn't want to talk about this anymore.

"I'm sorry I freaked out earlier. It wasn't about you."

I stared at Clay, shocked that he was bringing this up. "It felt like it was about me."

Clay licked his lips. I pushed the thought of kissing him away as soon as it popped up. He clearly didn't want that. I got my answer loud and clear. He literally ran away from the evidence of my attraction to him.

"I wasn't trying to make a move on you, if that's what you're worried about," I said, sullenly.

"I'm not worried, Emmett." The corner of Clay's mouth curved up, giving me a glimmer of hope that I could salvage this friendship.

Hoping to reassure Clay, I added, "Trust me, it'll never happen again. I'm not into you like that. I'm not desperate enough for affection to go after you. It was totally involuntary. Like you in math class."

Clay's smile fell away. He nodded. "Right. Okay. Good."

"I know we just met, but I really like being your friend, Clay. I don't want to jeopardize that because of something I can't control."

"I like being your friend, too," Clay said, glancing at me with a tight smile. "And, trust me, we're cool."

I was pleased to hear it. I'd never been drawn to anyone the way I was to Clay. I didn't want to give that up, no matter what it took to keep him.

Chapter 11 - Can't Fight This Feeling

- *Clay* -

Emmett's words cut like a knife through the heart. I tried not to let on how upset I was when he said what happened would never happen again. That he wasn't into me like that. That he wasn't *desperate* enough to want me. But did I even want it to happen again? Did I want Emmett to like me that way?

Why had my chest filled with fire upon learning that Emmett had been with Duke? What did Duke have that I didn't? And why did that matter to me so much?

And why did I feel so protective of Emmett seeing him in distress earlier? We barely knew each other.

There was a very simple answer to all those questions, but I didn't know if I could go there yet.

Emmett looked tormented by Duke's presence. He even called him Alfie. No one called him that. No one even used his first name-not even teachers. Desperate to take the attention off of Emmett in that moment, I shook up the beer can I'd been holding-unable to bring myself to open it, recalling my promise to Emmett's mother. That panic in Emmett's eyes when he gave our secret sign, and the subsequent gratitude, told me I did the right thing.

After I let Emmett out at his house, I drove away.

I didn't stop at my house. I just kept going as a heavy pressure built in my chest. I turned the air conditioner on full blast, adjusting all the vents to blow directly in my face. A claustrophobic smothering took hold of me, making it hard to catch my breath. I turned on my calming playlist, hoping to get this under control before it became a problem.

I drove and drove and drove until night fell and my mother actually did call me to find out when I was coming home.

I couldn't get Emmett out of my head. His arms around me. His body pressed against my back. That fantasy about us in the woods. I was still thinking about it when I went home and got in the shower, hoping this one time of giving into the temptation would exorcise these feelings. But when I finished, I just felt empty because Emmett just wanted to be friends. I stood under the water, letting it spill over my head until it turned cold and made my skin break out into gooseflesh all over.

I went to bed early, unable to eat when my mom called me to dinner. My stomach twisted into knots. The feelings did not get washed down the drain as I'd hoped.

That night, I had the worst sleep of my life.

Chapter 12 - Crush Culture

- *Clay* -

I wallowed in a funk of despair and self-loathing for several days, fretting about what happened. I barely ate. I also worried about what I did in the shower when I got home that day—what I thought about while doing it—and what that meant for me.

Emmett was all I could think about. Every time he came to mind, desire took over, overshadowing all other thoughts. Emmett's soft hands grabbing my face, pulling it to his, connecting us at the lips. Then came the tongues, and the hands, and everything else.

I had never experienced this kind of uncontrollable lust for someone before. I'd had five girlfriends, and not a single one of them elicited this response. They were all beautiful girls—Summer more than anyone. I cared about each of them, but I never wanted them like this. I never craved their touch the way I craved Emmett's.

The mere thought of Emmett's hands on me sent me reeling more than actually having sex ever had, and that scared me.

Seeking a non-sexual outlet to relieve all that tension, I tried working out. It always worked on my anxiety. I figured it might help with this, too. I started with my usual jog around the neighborhood. When that proved fruitless, I moved on to more intense exercises: push-ups, pull-ups, crunches, lunges, squats. I tried everything.

Nearly an hour later, I finally gave up the effort. It didn't work. The only way to make it go away was to give in to it.

Afterwards, I showered and dressed, making up my mind that I needed to see Emmett. Distance didn't make the feelings go away, so why torture myself? It had been five days, and I missed him terribly.

How was it possible to miss someone I just met this much?

I drove up the street to pick up a bag of doughnuts from Donut Run. I'd burned enough calories this morning to earn one—or five.

My skin felt electrified as I neared Emmett's street. If I kept going straight, I could just go back home. Back to my old life. Eat my doughnuts and keep ignoring these feelings. Maybe they would eventually pass.

I didn't even realize I'd made the turn until I saw Emmett's house up ahead. Apparently, my body decided for me. My body wanted Emmett, even if my mind was resisting.

I parked at the curb in front of the blue house. I grabbed the bag of doughnuts and headed up the sidewalk, lined with little yellow flowers.

The front door opened before I got there. Emmett's mother stepped out. She was a beautiful woman with the same olive skin and black hair as her son. I hadn't taken the time to notice her the other day, too concerned with checking out Emmett. Also, she had her face mostly hidden behind her giant coffee mug almost the whole time.

Mrs. Noble startled at the sight of me. She clutched at her chest. "You scared me."

"Sorry." I offered a sheepish grin. "I don't know if you remember me, from the other day."

"If I didn't on my own, my son has made sure I can't forget."

What did that mean? Had Emmett been talking about me a lot?

"Is he here?"

She laughed, brushing her hair back off her shoulder. "Emmett is still in bed. He rarely wakes up before eleven when school is out."

"Oh." My excitement deflated, my shoulders slumping. Eleven was two more hours. "I guess I'll just, um... I'll come back later."

"Wait!" Mrs. Noble said when I turned to go. I looked back over my shoulder. "You're more than welcome to try waking him." She pushed the front door open and waved inside.

"I don't want to disturb him."

Mrs. Noble had an impish grin on her face. "I think he'd be okay with it. He'll be more upset if he finds out he missed you."

I perked up at that. "Are you sure?" I asked, already walking to the door.

"Will you tell him I went to work?"

"Sure." I paused after stepping over the threshold. I looked at her. "Thanks."

Mrs. Noble smiled and waved, walking over to her car.

I pushed the door shut and walked up the stairs. My feet felt heavier with every step I climbed. I imagined that scene from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* where Nancy is trying to go up the stairs, but her feet sink into the floor. My heart hammered against my rib cage as I reached Emmett's door.

I took a deep, steadying breath as I twisted the knob around. The room was dark, so I waited for my eyes to adjust until the light streaming around the edges of the curtains became enough to see by.

Emmett's bed was slotted sideways into the recess in the front wall, by the large window that overlooked the street. I remembered there being a bookshelf at the foot of the bed, too. A small television hung on the wall above it, so Emmett could watch TV in bed. I thought the setup was so cool when I first saw it.

I shuffled over to the bed and perched on the very edge. I set the bag of doughnuts on the floor.

Being closer to the window, I could see Emmett much better now. I hadn't gotten a chance to really study him the few times we'd hung out. I had forced myself not to stare at him. But I couldn't help myself now that I had the opportunity. Emmett had a slight bump in the bridge of his nose. A

small beauty mark above his left eyebrow. His round, full lips brought about thoughts of kissing.

I pushed the intrusive thought away, realizing how creepy it was to watch someone sleep. Especially when they weren't aware of your presence. It might be different if we were in a relationship and we'd fallen asleep together. But if Emmett woke up right now, he'd totally think I was a psycho stalker among the ranks of Sting, Edward Cullen, and Joe Goldberg.

I reached out and shook Emmett's shoulder, mumbling his name.

Emmett grumbled but didn't wake.

I tried again. This time, shaking Emmett harder and speaking louder.

"Wha?" Emmett snapped. His lashes fluttered, his eyelids cracking open to look up.

When his eyes met mine, they went wide. He jolted up in bed, clutching his covers in his lap. I jumped to my feet, worried about being too close. Relief warred with disappointment when I saw he slept in a t-shirt.

I didn't know how to feel about wanting to see him shirtless.

"What are you doing here?" Emmett asked. It sounded almost like an accusation.

Now I felt like I was intruding. Even if Emmett's mother told me to wake him, that didn't mean he wanted me here.

To answer the question, I bent down beside the bed to retrieve the bag. "I brought apology doughnuts."

Emmett wiped the sleep from the corners of his eyes. "What are you apologizing for?"

"For disappearing on you. I just got super busy." That wasn't totally a lie. I had busied myself every day to take my mind off those fantasies of him.

"What kind ya got?"

I held the bag out. "A few glazed. I figured that was a safe bet since I wasn't sure what you like. There's also a cruller, a chocolate, and a strawberry iced with sprinkles."

Emmett grabbed the bag and looked inside. "Which one is yours?"

"I eat them all. Just take whatever you want."

Emmett grinned. "You're going to make me fall in love with you."

If only .

"Will you hit the light?" Emmett asked.

I walked over to the door and flipped the switch, blinking against the influx of brightness.

Emmett patted the bed, scooting over. My muscles were sluggish as I went back to sit beside him, tucking one leg under the other. The bed was warm in the spot Emmett had just vacated. I noticed for the first time that the walls around his bed were a deep, rich shade of royal blue. The others were all a much lighter shade, like the powdery blue of the early morning sky.

"These always remind me of *The Simpsons* ." Emmett pulled out the strawberry iced doughnut and took a bite, getting a bit of icing stuck to his lip.

When I imagined leaning over to lick that away, I tugged the hem of my shirt down to cover my lap so he couldn't see the effects of that thought.

"Want a bite?" Emmett asked, holding out the doughnut.

The offer was too tempting to pass up. If I couldn't kiss Emmett, I could at least put my lips where his had been. That was almost as good. Right?

I stretched forward and took a bite, holding my hand under my chin to catch the sprinkles falling off. "It's so good," I said, before licking the excess

sugar off my palm.

Emmett smiled and wiped something off the corner of my mouth. I didn't know what it was, but Emmett licked it off his finger.

Oh my fucking God!

I went from halfway hard to full-on rock solid. It was hard—no pun intended—to deny my feelings when my body reacted this way around him.

"Is it horrible that I want you to feel bad every day so I can get doughnuts?" Emmett mumbled around a mouthful of cruller.

I laughed. "I'll bring you doughnuts every morning, if that's what you want."

"God, I really need to find me a man like you." Emmett looked over at me, his eyes wide. " *Not you* ! Obviously. Just someone to lavish me with delicious goodies."

I wanted to say, "I'm right here if you want me." I would give Emmett anything he asked for. But he didn't see me that way. He just wanted to be my friend. He'd made that fact very clear.

So, I bottled up my feelings. I just chuckled and nodded in response.

Chapter 13 - Holy Ground

- *Emmett* -

The next evening, Clay called to ask me over to his house for dinner. "Meeting the parents, huh? Isn't that kinda serious?"

Clay gave one of his carefree laughs that melted my cold, dead heart. "I thought it was time. Besides, my sister invited her boyfriend over. She's freaking out that our parents are going to scare him away."

"Okay, you found my weakness. I'm a sucker for young love."

"You are the best."

I went through three pairs of pants and five shirts before I settled on an outfit. I didn't want to be too casual, but I also didn't want to look like I was trying to impress them. It was stupid to care so much about meeting my friend's parents.

But Clay wasn't just an ordinary friend. If this were Carrie, I'd throw on some jogging shorts and a random t-shirt from my drawer. I certainly wouldn't have put on my best cologne.

Nor would I be bothering to gel my stupid fucking hair that would not comply with my wishes. No matter how much I fussed with it, my hair never seemed to go just how I wanted. That always seemed to be the case. On a regular day, it would look like it had just been freshly styled by a professional. Tonight, it flipped and flopped and stuck up in all the wrong places.

I finally gave up trying to perfect it after ten minutes. My efforts were only making it worse.

"You look spiffy," Mom said as I got to the bottom of the stairs. "Got a hot date?"

I shook my head and explained where I was going.

"You must really like him to meet his family. I didn't know it was serious between you two."

"We're just friends."

"If you say so." She raised her hands in surrender.

"He's straight!"

"If that's the case, then why are you dressed like you're about to go on a date?"

I looked down at my outfit—a basic maroon shirt and navy shorts with my gray lace-up Vans. I thought it was simple, but respectable. I didn't expect to get called out on it. "I just like to look nice sometimes."

" *Mm-hmm* ." Mom walked over and placed her hands on my shoulders. "Sweetheart, don't make the same mistake you made with Alfie."

"This isn't even remotely the same thing. Alfie was my boyfriend. Clay is *just* my friend. I know the difference."

"Alright." She brushed her hands over my shoulders. "Go on. Have fun."

"It's dinner with his family. I doubt it'll be fun."

She frowned. "Not with that attitude."

"You wouldn't want to let me borrow the car to drive over there, would you?"

"Not after you backed into the mailbox the other day."

"Because you kept yelling at me."

"Because you were headed straight for the mailbox!" She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed.

"Could you at least give me a ride?" I asked. "It's so hot and I don't want to get sweaty riding my bike."

"That I can do." She grabbed her keys and phone off the counter and followed me out the door.

On the way out, we spotted Dr. Herrera getting out of her car across the street. We all exchanged waves.

"Hot date tonight, Em?" Dr. Herrera yelled.

"He says he's just a friend," Mom shouted back before I could answer.

Dr. Herrera pointed her index finger to the sky, her keys clutched in her other fingers. "That's how the best love stories start."

"Seriously!" I glared at my mother, then at the woman whom I thought of—and referred to—as my second mother. "Why is everyone ganging up on me?"

"Have a good time, *mijo* !" Dr. Herrera waved again before going inside her house.

At Clay's house, I quickly escaped the car. I waved at my mother, hoping she'd just drive away, but she rolled down her window instead. "Maybe I should come meet them."

"You will not!" I was horrified at the suggestion. And not just because she was wearing yoga pants.

"I'm sorry, mister." Mom raised a single brow, pointedly. "Since when do I take orders from you?"

"Please, Mom." I clasped my hands together. "If you love me, you will leave."

"Fine. Call me if you need a ride home." With that, she left.

Knowing that it was a bad idea, I pulled out my phone and turned on the godawful front facing camera. I pushed a hand through my hair, hoping the extra attention would finally get it right. The humidity was doing me no favors. I thought it was better, but I wasn't sure. My eyes shifted to focus on how puffy the camera made my face look. Did I have a double chin or was that just the angle? I turned the camera off, unable to look at the distorted image of my face, refusing to believe I actually looked like that. Whoever invented that fucking thing should never be allowed to use another camera for the rest of their life, only that abomination.

Giving up hope for my hair, I went to the front door. The mat had the name "Miller" printed on it rather than "Welcome." It suddenly occurred to me I'd never actually asked for Clay's last name.

Almost immediately after I knocked, a teenage girl flung open the door. Her bright smile instantly faded to a scowl. She was very pretty, with the same light brown hair as Clay, though hers had pink streaks through it. Her eyes were crystal blue instead of that rich chocolate brown shade of Clay's that I adored.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked in a high, squeaky voice. She seemed distraught.

Clay walked up to stand behind the girl. The top of her head barely reached to his shoulder. "Don't be rude, Rachel. I invited him to take the pressure off you and Zack."

Rachel eyed me and pursed her lips. She spun around, her long hair swinging around to smack Clay's arm. "Where is he?" she groaned, lifting her phone to type something.

Clay turned to me and looked me over, a smile on his lips. "You look great, but you didn't have to get all fancy for us." Clay waved a hand down to his plain gray shorts and a faded Captain America t-shirt. He was even barefoot.

I tried not to let the compliment go to my head. I simply shrugged. "I've been wearing this all day. I had stuff to do."

Clay waved for me to enter. After closing the door behind me, Clay asked, "Like what?"

I was not expecting a follow-up question. "Um, I was just... you know. *Out* . Doing stuff. With Carrie."

Clay suddenly became very smiley. "That's really weird. Because Jackson was also out with Carrie all day. He didn't mention seeing you."

I sucked in a breath as my heart dropped into my stomach. Why did I ever bother lying? I was so terrible at it. But I couldn't give up now. "Well, I was with her before him. We must've just missed each other."

"Uh-huh." Clay nodded, still highly amused.

"Then I had other stuff to do. My friend Makenzie. She wanted to go shopping." That part was true. Makenzie asked me to go shopping, but I turned her down. Under the right circumstances, she could be very fun. She could also be kind of grating sometimes without someone else to act as a buffer. Don't get me wrong, I loved her dearly. If not for Carrie, she'd probably be my best friend. She just had a tendency to drone on about herself and her problems endlessly.

"Okay." Clay gestured for me to follow him. "You're a bit early, so we can just hang out in my room until the food's done."

"Sure." The thought of being in Clay's room gave me heart palpitations.

Clay bypassed the stairs Rachel had gone up and headed toward the archway at the back of the living room that led into a large kitchen. Everything was immaculate and white, except for a few yellow decor items—the ruffled valance over the window, the hand towels and a glass jar on the counter filled with lemons which were a bit too shiny and perfect to be real. Clay stopped to introduce me to a woman with his beautiful eyes and serene smile. Her hair was lighter than his or his sister's, much closer to blonde. "It's nice to finally meet you, Emmett. Clay hasn't stopped talking about you for a week."

"Mom!" Clay squeaked.

Mrs. Miller placed a hand against the side of her face. "Oh, I'm wrong. He hasn't said a word about you. He hasn't even spoken to me since last Tuesday."

"Oh my God." Clay murmured, rubbing a hand against his face.

I laughed and glanced at Clay, who looked mortified, his cheeks a bright shade of pink. He grabbed my forearm and dragged me through a door off to the side of the room, closing it behind us.

I first thought it might be a den. Carrie's house had one of those. All the furniture was extra plush for nights spent vegging out and watching movies or our recent obsession with the international versions of *Drag Race* .

Actually, it was Clay's bedroom. Which I should have known, since that's where Clay said we were going. So, yes, I was a moron.

He wasn't kidding when he told me his room was basic. It was so bland, in varying degrees of beige. The walls were beige, as were the carpet and the drapes, even the furniture, which was clearly a set from some chain store. The red and black bedspread was just about the only pop of color in the entire room. A small black bookshelf stood in one corner, mostly filled with movies, video games, and knickknacks. It was the kind you put together yourself where some of the pieces never fit exactly right. He only had a few books on it: *The Scarlet Letter* , *Romeo and Juliet* , *The Outsiders* , and *A Tale of Two Cities* .

"I never pictured you as a fan of the classics."

"What?"

I pointed to the bookshelf.

"Oh." Clay gave a dismissive wave toward the shelf. "Those are all books I had to read for school. I don't really read much for myself. Or, like, at all."

A distressed sound escaped my mouth without consent. I couldn't fathom that. "I love reading."

Clay smiled, showing off his perfect teeth. "I noticed. You've got like a thousand books in your room. I was a little intimidated by you that first day I came over."

"Me?" I found it hard to believe I could ever intimidate anyone.

"Uh, yeah." Clay nodded, taking a seat on the corner of his bed. A lot of thoughts flashed through my mind involving Clay and that bed and me. "I have friends who read a lot, but they read stuff like *Hunger Games* or Percy Jackson. Rachel was obsessed with those Shadowhunter books. But you had like serious books. I saw stuff on your shelf I've never even heard of that were thicker than textbooks."

"That was probably one of my Russians. Some of them took me forever to get through. I had so much trouble with all those names. I had to look up pronunciations practically every time a new character popped up."

"It's not just the books. That poster thing Carrie made you. I took a photo of it when you weren't looking, and I googled some of those titles when I got home. Nearly a third of them aren't even in English."

I shrugged, still making my way around the room, checking everything out. "Hollywood isn't the be-all end-all of filmmaking. Foreign films are amazing, too. Most people are just too lazy to read subtitles."

"You like being different from everyone else around here, don't you?"

I folded my arms behind my back, viewing his collection of sports paraphernalia displayed on a shelf above his dresser, including a few trophies for peewee football and Little League. "It's not so much a matter of me liking it, as it is a fact. I don't really fit in well in this town. I'm sure if you looked in places like New York, Seattle, LA you'd find a ton of guys just like me."

"I disagree," Clay said. The way he said that made me blush, but I didn't know why.

I looked back at him. He almost seemed in awe of me. I didn't think I deserved the admiration. Sure, I liked to read, but so did lots of people. There was nothing special about me.

I faced the wall, wandering around to keep Clay from seeing the effect he elicited.

I paused when I reached his desk. A framed photo—the only one in the room that wasn't of his family—sat between an autographed football encased in glass and a small metal lockbox with a combination dial and a slot for coins in the top. I couldn't help myself. I picked up the photo to examine a gorgeous black girl staring back. She had thick black curls flowing over her shoulder and piercing gray eyes. Her smile was sweet, with a slight sultriness. She was sitting on Clay's bed. It had a different comforter, but I recognized the boring sand-colored wood headboard and the black and white print of the London skyline hanging above it.

I turned around to double check it was the same skyline, but I knew it would be before I saw it.

"That's Summer." Clay walked over to take the picture away. He opened the desk drawer and shoved it inside, shutting the drawer back. "I didn't even notice I still had that out."

"Are you sure you didn't have feelings for her? You seem kinda broken up."

Clay raised his eyes to meet mine. "I told you I cared about her. I didn't want to hurt her. But I did. And it sucks. She hasn't even talked to me since then."

"I'm sorry."

Clay shook his head. "I also told you that you were right about me and her. She deserved better than me."

I laid a hand on Clay's shoulder. "Don't sell yourself short. You're a great guy, Clay. I doubt there's a better one in this town."

Clay examined my face for a long time. He was so close that I could smell whatever soap or deodorant or aftershave he used. It definitely wasn't that intoxicating icy cologne that I loved. Of course, he wouldn't put on cologne to have dinner at his own house.

Clay's eyes seemed to get stuck on my lips for a second. They jumped up to meet my eyes. His chin lifted a fraction of an inch and his lips parted, like he was about to say something. Then the door opened. Clay jolted back from me like he'd just been electrocuted.

Clay's mother stuck her head inside. "Dinner's ready, boys."

"Did Zack show up?" Clay threw a sidelong glance my way as he walked toward the door, putting more distance between us.

Mrs. Miller's face turned dreary. That was all the confirmation needed.

"Where is she?" Clay asked.

"She won't come out of her room."

"Let me try." Clay passed his mother, leaving me alone.

I wondered if I should wait for Clay, but his mother signaled for me to follow her.

She went to the pale wood table on the opposite side of the kitchen from Clay's room, where a toddler with dark curls sat in a high chair. The back wall had three sets of French windows that looked out onto a patio surrounded by a lush, colorful garden. The table was set nicely, all the food in matching dinnerware in the center. I had never seen actual meals presented this way. It was straight out of a movie. I wondered if this was an everyday occurrence or if they set this up for Rachel's boyfriend.

Mrs. Miller sat beside the baby and gestured for me to take the chair next to her.

I sat, tucking my hands in my lap. I wasn't sure how to act. The only parent I ever interacted with besides my own was Dr. Herrera.

She propped her elbows on the table, interlocking her hands. "Clay tells me you go to Heron Prep."

I nodded. "Mm-hmm."

"Do you like it?"

"It's hard, but I appreciate the challenge."

She seemed to admire that answer. She leaned toward me and lowered her voice to say, "Don't tell Clay I said so, but I think you're going to be a wonderful influence on him. Most of his friends are... shall we say *lax* when it comes to school."

I wondered if she'd still feel that way about me, if she knew all the salacious thoughts I had about her son. Would she still invite me to dinner?

A man appeared from behind me and took a seat opposite Clay's mother. He was not at all how I would've pictured Clay's father to look. I expected an older version of Clay. This man didn't look like Clay at all. He had a rounder, slightly stout build and a long face. The closest resemblance was his brown hair, thinning a bit at the temples, though it was much darker.

"You must be Zack." The man smiled at me.

I opened my mouth to make the correction, but Clay's mother beat me to it. "This is Clay's friend."

"The prep school boy!"

How often did Clay actually talk about me? I worried I might blush.

"Also known as Emmett," I quipped to relieve the tension only I was aware of.

They both laughed at my weak joke.

The man extended his hand across the table for a handshake. "Mike Miller."

I shook his hand, trying not to wince at his overly firm grip. "Emmett Noble."

Mr. Miller looked around the table, then to his wife. "Where are the kids?" Mrs. Miller gave a quick rundown of events. His brows drooped with disappointment. "Poor Bean. She's probably crushed."

"Bean?" I asked, confused.

"That's what we call Clay's sister," Mrs. Miller said. "She was a skinny thing when she was little. Their dad called her beanpole. Eventually, it just became Bean. I think she still lets us call her that because it reminds her of him."

Mrs. Miller was talking about him like he wasn't sitting four feet away from her. I looked over at the man across from me.

Mr. Miller shook his head. "She means their biological father."

"Oh."

Mrs. Miller laid a hand on my arm. "Their father passed away when they were very young. Clay was only nine. Mike adopted them when we got married. That's why their last name is Lennox-Miller. I guess Clay didn't tell you."

"No." I didn't even know Clay's actual last name until this very moment. "I'm sorry."

Mrs. Miller patted my shoulder. "It's okay."

Rachel's voice carried from the next room. "I'm going to strangle him the second I see him at school next week."

I turned in my chair to see Rachel and Clay enter the room. Her eyes were puffy and pink around the edges, but she looked more angry than sad. Clay had his arm around her, his face alight with amusement. "Maybe wait till

school lets out and do it across the street so they can't suspend you for violence on school grounds." Clay's smile widened when he locked eyes with me.

"Clayton!" Mrs. Miller snapped.

Clayton? I never considered that Clay wasn't his given name. Clay fit him better than Clayton. That's for sure.

"I was only kidding, Mom,"

Clay sat next to me. Rachel took the chair between Mr. Miller and the baby—Teddy.

"Alright," Mrs. Miller said. "Dig in."

Everyone grabbed the nearest dish and started shoveling food onto their plate. I copied them, offering my dish to Mrs. Miller, as Clay passed a dish on to me, until everyone had some of everything they wanted.

"Rachel, I know it's none of my business," I said, "but I think you should ignore him. Unless he has a genuine excuse, just act like he doesn't exist."

"That's better than throttling the boy," Mr. Miller chimed in with a hearty chuckle.

"Does that actually work, though?" Rachel asked, poking her fork into her peas.

"It always drove me crazy when my ex-boyfriend did it." I stiffened, my blood running cold, realizing what I'd just said. I was so accustomed to being open about myself that I sometimes forgot I couldn't be that candid in every situation. I didn't know these people. Just because Clay was cool with it didn't mean his family shared his ideals.

No one seemed to be reaching for holy water or a crucifix to cast out the homosexual demon, so I suspected I was alright.

"Was he a total douchebag, like Zack?" Rachel asked.

"Rachel! Language!" Mrs. Miller barked, throwing a glance at the baby.

I was hesitant to go into this. Maybe they'd overlook one mention of the gay, but an entire conversation might be another story. But they all looked at me expectantly. So, I answered, "Um, I didn't think he was at first. But yeah. In the end, that's exactly what he turned out to be. He didn't talk to me for two weeks and then I found him kissing someone else at a party. I kinda figured we were done at that point."

Clay stared at me, his brows knitting together. He must have put the pieces together, guessing the identity of the ex-boyfriend in question. He placed his hand on my thigh, sending shivers up my spine, across my shoulders, straight to my throbbing heart. "No one should treat anyone like that. Especially when they're supposed to be your partner."

I barely heard Clay's words, too distracted by how close his hand was to certain other parts. His hand didn't linger long, but I felt the heat of his touch even after he pulled away.

"I couldn't agree more," Mrs. Miller said, raising her wineglass, toasting the sentiment.

Through the rest of dinner, everyone shared stories of horrible exes to make Rachel feel better. I wasn't sure if it worked, but she was smiling and laughing after a while.

After dinner, Clay drove me home. He parked in front of the house, turning the music down low—The Killers "All These Things That I've Done." He turned to me with a smile. "So, what did you think of them?"

"Your family is awesome," I said. "I'm sorry I brought up the gay thing, though."

"Why? It's who you are. I don't want you to feel like you have to hide that."

"But I do have to hide it sometimes. In some places. With some people."

"That really sucks."

I wanted to change the subject, but only one thing came to mind. "Your mom told me about your real father."

"Mike is my real father," Clay said adamantly. "Just as much as my dad was."

"I didn't mean to offend you."

"I'm sorry." Clay shook his head, sighing. "I can be defensive about it. But Mike has been part of my life for almost as long as my dad was before he died. And, honestly, I remember more of my life with Mike than with my dad."

The mournful—almost guilty—look on Clay's face made me sad. I wanted to reach out to him, maybe hold his hand to make him feel better. But I didn't.

"Do you mind if I ask what happened to him?"

"He had cancer. It all happened really quick. Within a few months of finding out he was sick, he was just gone." Clay huffed out a bitter laugh.

Clay picked up his phone from between the seats, waking it. The pale light washed out his skin, throwing shadows across his face, making dark hollows beneath his high cheekbones. He tapped a few times and flipped the screen around to face me. It showed a picture of a man and a little boy. The man looked just like Clay, only with creases in his forehead and deep laugh lines around his smiling lips, which were thinner than Clay's. The man also had Rachel's blue eyes.

I smiled when my eyes drifted down to little Clay, freckle-faced and beaming at the camera with several missing teeth.

Clay put the phone to sleep and dropped it in his lap. His eyes lifted to meet mine. "The day we met was the anniversary of his death."

I had a light bulb moment. "That's why you were being such a dick."

He nodded. "I woke up that day feeling like I was on the verge of a panic attack. Like my body knew what day it was before my brain even acknowledged it. I was so awful that day. To everyone. Especially Summer. She kept asking what was wrong and I wouldn't tell her and that's when we got into the fight where she told me I don't open up to her."

"That night suddenly makes so much sense now." I shook my head. I'd be a dick too, if I were him.

"Talking to you that night was the first time that whole day I felt calm."

I rubbed his arm. "I'm glad I could be there for you. I just wished I'd known. I probably would've been nicer. Maybe not yelled at you."

"I deserved being yelled at."

Clay cleared his throat and readjusted in his seat. "So, what about your dad?"

"He's alive. They're divorced and have been for as long as I can remember. He lives in Baltimore now. His job moved him there a couple years ago. I see him when I can. He comes to town on major holidays, and I visited him for Spring Break last year." I shrugged. There wasn't much to tell. My parents got along great. They just claimed they didn't get along well as a couple.

"At dinner, that was Duke you were talking about, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"He really did that to you? Just ghosted and moved on?"

I nodded. "He was my first real boyfriend. I was madly in love with him, but I guess he didn't feel the same way. Then again, I haven't had the best track record with the guys I like, liking me back."

Clay's face was rigid, very controlled. "I should probably get back home."

"Okay." I unhooked my seatbelt. I really wished I could just stretch across and kiss Clay right now. Even if only on the cheek. But guys didn't do that with other guys. Certainly not here.

"Goodnight, Emmett."

I tried not to smile as I said, "Goodnight, *Clayton* ."

Clay scoffed, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Don't ever call me that again! I hate my full name. It sounds so wrong."

I laughed. "Goodnight, Clay. I had a great time."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay." I got out and headed for the front door. I paused and turned, realizing I hadn't heard the car leave yet. Clay was watching me.

The window rolled down and Clay shouted, "I'm not leaving until you go inside."

"Okay, weirdo." I couldn't help but smile. This was too much like a date. It was giving me ideas that I'd never be able to act on.

I unlocked the front door and stepped into the house. "Bye."

Clay waved before rolling up the window. He waited until I closed the door to drive off.

I leaned against the door, sighing. I had it bad for that boy. This was going to be a problem eventually. But, if only for tonight, I would enjoy it.

Chapter 14 - I Want You to Want Me

- *Clay* -

I returned home, lighter than air, in a sort of daze as I drifted through the house, toward my room, flipping my keys around my middle finger. The way Emmett watched me in the car, talking about my dad, was difficult, but he made me want to share. Even the hard stuff. I wanted to tell him everything about me.

Then he teased me about my name, bringing out his adorable, mischievous grin. I so badly wanted to kiss him before he got out of the car. I thought about it more seriously than I ever had.

But fear stopped me. Not so much fear of kissing Emmett, because I had a feeling that would be amazing. More so, fear of upsetting him. He'd made it pretty clear that he didn't want me in that way. Multiple times.

"Hey," my mother said, catching me off guard. She stood at the stove, putting the leftovers in Tupperware containers.

"Hey." I stuffed my keys into my pocket and walked over to stand beside her. I took the stack of dirty dishes from the counter and rinsed them, placing them into the dishwasher.

"I really like him," Mom said. As if I couldn't guess who she meant, she added, "Emmett. He's very sweet."

"Yeah."

Mom took the containers to the refrigerator. "You should bring him around more often."

That made me smile. "I will."

Everyone seemed to like Emmett. Even Rachel, who hated all of my other friends. Except Brandon, who she had a huge crush on. Emmett just fit right into our family, like he belonged with us.

Mom returned to my side. She put her hands on my shoulders and gave my cheek a kiss. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Night, Mom."

After turning on the dishwasher, I headed into my room. I laid across the bed, my hands folded on my stomach, staring at the ceiling, imagining what might have happened if I had been bold enough to kiss Emmett. Either in the car, or in this very room. I'd wanted to both times.

Best-case scenario, Emmett would kiss me back, bringing to life all of my fantasies.

Worst case, Emmett would hate me for ruining our friendship and never talk to me again.

That, I would not risk.

As if falling for a guy wasn't confusing enough, I had chosen one who didn't even want me.

"You fucking idiot," I mumbled to myself.

I jumped when my phone dinged in my pocket and buzzed against my hip. I rolled to the side to fish it out to see the reason for the notification.

A text from Emmett. I sat up, a smile breaking across my face.

EMMETT: *This is probably a stupid question since we just saw each other, but do you want to talk?*

CLAY: *About what?*

EMMETT: ♂

EMMETT: *Just feeling chatty and kinda bored .*

I bit my bottom lip as I laid back again, writing a reply. Emmett could've texted Carrie, but he chose me to cure his boredom.

CLAY: *How can u already be bored? I just left like 10 mins ago.*

EMMETT: *Never underestimate the dangerous swiftness of monotony.*

CLAY: *That sounds like a quote. What's it from?*

EMMETT: *It's only a quote in that I said it. It's not from anything except my diamond-sharp wit.*

CLAY: *There's that famous unparalleled Emmett humility.*

EMMETT: *Humble and handsome are my main identifiers.*

CLAY: *Hahaha. We'll have to agree to disagree abt the former.*

EMMETT: *So you agree that I'm handsome?*

"Fuck!" I sat up and stared at the words. I didn't mean it like that. I was trying to be funny. Not that I didn't think Emmett was handsome. Emmett was the most beautiful boy I'd ever met. With those green eyes and that olive skin.

I realized it had been almost a full minute since Emmett's last text. I couldn't keep stalling. I needed to reply, if only to keep things from getting weird.

I thought I'd go for something lighthearted, to play it off as another joke.

CLAY: *I refuse to answer on the basis of what it might do to ur ego.*

EMMETT: *I'm totally taking that as a confirmation.*

CLAY: *That's ur prerogative.*

EMMETT: *They say I'm crazy. I really don't care.*

CLAY: *What?*

EMMETT: *They say I'm nasty, but I don't give a damn.*

CLAY: *Who says that?*

EMMETT: *Getting boys is how I live.*

CLAY: *wtf r u talking about?*

EMMETT: *Everybody's talking all this stuff about me. Why don't they just let me live?*

CLAY: *Who's talking abt u?*

EMMETT: *I don't need permission. Make my own decisions.*

CLAY: *I guess I get that.*

EMMETT: *That's my prerogative!*

CLAY: *What the actual fuck is going on!?!?*

Emmett sent a series of laughing faces, followed by a link to a Britney Spears song, called "My Prerogative." As soon as I clicked it, I knew I'd heard it before. Although the version I knew was sung by a man.

I laughed.

CLAY: *U r such a dork.*

EMMETT: *A handsome dork?*

CLAY: *Fine. Yes. Ur handsome. OK? Fuck off.*

EMMETT: *Wanna play a game?*

CLAY: *Is that u, Jigsaw?*

I sent a gif of the puppet riding a tricycle from Saw.

EMMETT: *I hate those movies.*

CLAY: *I thought u liked horrible movies. Psycho was on ur poster of fave films.*

CLAY: *Fuck. I meant horror. Fucking auto-correct. I messed up one ducking letter.*

CLAY: *Fuck my whore life.*

EMMETT:

CLAY: *I give up. U talk now.*

EMMETT: *LOL. Ok.*

EMMETT: *Horror, thriller, yes. I can do that. Give me Psycho, The Shining, Rosemary's Baby. I can even have fun with movies like Halloween or Scream. But watching people get tortured for two hours for no reason and almost no plot? Not so much.*

CLAY: *What game did u wanna play?*

EMMETT: *20 questions.*

CLAY: *K.*

We went back and forth, asking each other questions. Mostly inane stuff, like "What's your favorite color?" It was a lot of getting-to-know-you stuff we hadn't discussed before. We learned each other's birthdays, our hobbies, and our favorites in TV shows, movies, and food.

This continued long after we passed the twentieth question. It was three in the morning when I finally asked if he was tired yet.

EMMETT: *Kinda. Are you?*

CLAY: *Yeah. Can we talk tomorrow?*

EMMETT: *Sure.*

CLAY: *Goodnight, Em.*

EMMETT: *Goodnight, Clay.*

Chapter 15 - Peace

- *Emmett* -

I wiped sweat off my brow with my forearm. With the sun blazing directly overhead, the forest surrounding the hiking trail offered no shade. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this. On a Saturday, no less. I could be relaxing in Carrie's pool right now."

Clay woke me early with a bag from Donut Run. He got all of my favorites. Including the jelly-filled that he disliked. It took me too long to realize it was a bribe to get me here. First-Thing-In-The-Morning Me was kind of an idiot.

"Hiking is good for you." Clay said, hooking his thumbs in the straps of his backpack. He was wearing a tank top that showed off his muscular arms and shoulders and his clavicles. I had never considered clavicles particularly sexy, but Clay's were certainly doing things to me.

"Not when it's a hundred fucking degrees Fahrenheit outside."

Clay looked down at his watch and tapped the screen. "It's eighty-two. Not a hundred."

That didn't take into account the humidity, which was stifling this time of year. One of the many joys of summers in the South.

Clay glanced back over his shoulder with an adorable smirk that gave me so many ideas that did not adhere to the guidelines of friendship—unless there were also some benefits tacked on. It had been almost three weeks now since we met, and I was no less enamored.

"I hate you," I said.

Clay laughed. The bubbly, joyful sound almost always lifted my mood. Well, not today. "You'll be thanking me when you get that endorphin rush."

It's an amazing high."

"If I wanted to get high, I'd smoke a bowl."

Clay stopped, waiting for me to catch up. "You mean weed?" He sounded curious, though he didn't seem judgmental about it.

"No. I mean Cap'n Crunch."

Clay cracked a smile. He held out his water bottle when I reached him. I swiped the bottle and flipped the lid, guzzling down the frigid relief.

Clay rubbed my back. "Slow down. You're gonna drink it all, and we're only halfway there."

"Ugh! Fuck my fucking life!" My voice echoed too loudly through the tranquil woods.

Clay made a strange face and started walking again.

I huffed, flipping the lid closed on the bottle. I trailed behind Clay, stomping my feet to show my disdain. I was being a petty bitch, but it didn't faze him at all. He just grinned at me, like he found my tantrums endearing.

"I've never tried anything like that before," Clay said.

It took me a moment to recall what we had been talking about as I'd gotten distracted by the dusting of freckles across his shoulders. "Um, weed or Cap'n Crunch? They pair well together, y'know."

"The Cap'n and I have a long, complicated history. I love his work with peanut butter, but it wrecks the roof of my mouth."

"The things we love often cause us pain."

"Don't I know it." Clay mumbled. I suspected I wasn't meant to hear that. Then, louder, he said, "I meant weed."

I smiled at him, even though he was facing the other way. "I know what you meant, Clay."

"I was always afraid I'd be one of those people that gets super paranoid and ends up crying in a corner."

"That's never happened to me. I just get mellow."

Clay stopped walking to wait for me again. "I'm not sure I even really want to try it."

"That's cool, too. No peer pressure here, my friend."

"I never understood peer pressure. Like, why does anyone care what other people do with their lives? If someone doesn't want to drink, or have sex, or try drugs, why does that bother some people?"

I suspected there was a story behind that outburst, but he didn't elaborate, and I didn't want to seem pushy, so I let it drop.

"I don't know," I said. "I have the same thoughts about homophobia."

Clay's face turned somber. He nodded. "I have those thoughts too."

"Really?" That intrigued me. "Why?"

"It's just something that's been on my mind since I met you. I hear little things around or from my friends. And, like, maybe they aren't being malicious about it, but then I think about how it would make you feel if you heard it, and it makes my blood boil."

"Trust me." I clapped Clay on the back. "I've heard it all. Nothing shocks me anymore."

"But it has to make you angry. Or maybe even afraid."

"Angry, yes. Afraid?" I bobbed my head from side to side, scrunching my face. "Well, that depends on the situation and what's actually being said. If it's just some douchebags at school running their mouth, calling something

gay as an insult, then I just roll my eyes and keep going. But if I heard them say something like they want to gun down some queers, I'd turn around and get the hell out of there as fast as I could without drawing attention to my fabulous self." I threw in a sassy snap for emphasis.

Clay blanched at the Q-word. I wondered if he'd ever even heard the term queer used in a non-homophobic context.

"Have you actually heard someone say that?" he asked. "The gunning down thing."

"No. That was an extreme example. Although I wouldn't be surprised if it had been discussed—" I affected a thick hillbilly drawl to make my point "*—in them thar hills over yonder .*"

Clay took a half step forward. "Would you be freaked out if I hugged you right now?"

I shook my head. "Uh. No."

Clay set his backpack down and slowly moved over to me. He seemed hesitant as he carefully wrapped his arms around me. Once I was in his arms, he squeezed me tight. "I'm sorry you have to deal with that kind of bullshit. You don't deserve that. Nobody does."

I raised my hands to Clay's lower back. I didn't care that it was sweaty. It was a nice hug. And there was nothing sexual about it. In this moment, Clay was just my friend, showing love and support.

Clay took a deep, shaky breath and pulled away. He picked up his pack, shouldering one strap. "Let's go." He gestured up the path and walked ahead.

I sighed and followed. "If I said forcing me to do this is homophobic, would you let me go back to the car?"

Clay laughed and turned to face me, walking backwards with annoying ease. "I promise, it'll be worth it."

" *Fiiine* ."

I kept my complaining in my head for most of the trek, only occasionally letting a gripe slip out. It seemed to amuse Clay, and he gave me that boyish grin that was so cheerful and gentle.

"I can't believe this is how you want to spend your last weekend before school starts," I said.

I still had a week left of my summer vacation. Heron Prep always started back later than the public school. Although on the flip-side, our school year ended later.

"Unlike you, I enjoy physical activity," Clay said.

"I enjoy some physical activities." I chose to omit the more lurid activities that sprung to mind first, moving on to the family-friendly fare. "I love yoga and swimming. And I could walk ten miles for something interesting like a music festival."

"Have you been to one?"

"Yeah. Me and Carrie went to this great festival last summer when I was trying to get over Alfie. It was on a beach down in Florida. We even camped out."

" *You* went camping?" Clay looked back at me with widened eyes. He slowed his pace to let me catch up.

When I reached him, I gave him a shove that barely moved him. "Yes, judgy. I went camping."

"I don't mean to offend you, you just aren't really outdoorsy."

"Just because I don't enjoy walking until my feet bleed, and peeling off blisters the size of quarters, doesn't mean I hate the outdoors."

"Fair enough." Clay studied me with a hint of a smile. "So, who did you see at the festival?"

"It was mostly indie people nobody's ever heard of. Definitely nobody that plays on country radio." I smirked at Clay.

Clay blew out an exasperated breath. "God, you're such an elitist."

"Am not?"

"In the entire time I've known you, I played exactly one—" he raised his index finger "—country song, and you won't let me forget it."

"I just don't get the appeal of that kind of music."

"Um, I'm sorry, but don't you love Taylor Swift?"

I gasped. "Don't you dare besmirch Taylor."

"I'd never do that. I actually like her. I'm just reminding you of her roots. And that country music can produce great artists. Not all of them sing about tractors, and pickups, and girls in bikinis. There's some actually decent stuff if you take the time to dig through the popular cowboy frat bro garbage."

"You have to dig pretty deep, though."

"What about Dolly Parton?" Clay asked. "You must like her. She's like the most amazing human being ever."

"Dolly's pretty great," I said. "Although, beyond her monster hits, I can't say I know any of her music."

"Well, without her we wouldn't have Whitney Houston's rendition of 'I Will Always Love You,' which is one of the greatest love songs of all time."

I made a noise of disagreement. "That's not really a love song, though. She's talking about how she loves the guy, but she has to leave him, because it's what's best for both of them."

"It's still a killer song."

"Agreed."

"And— *Oh my God!* —what about 'Crazy' by Patsy Cline? That's such a good song."

I shook my head. "I don't think I've heard that."

"You so have. I think everyone's heard that song. It's in so many movies and shows."

"How does it go?"

I expected him to recite the lyrics. I did not think he'd actually sing it. But that's exactly what that beautiful son of a bitch did. With his sweet (though not entirely in tune) voice that gave me chills.

" *Crazy. I'm crazy for feeling so lonely. I'm crazy. Crazy for feeling so blue.* "

He sang the entire song, looking into my eyes the whole time. And I swear to God my heart nearly exploded with joy. I loved his voice, even if it wasn't perfect.

"That was one of my dad's favorite songs." He had a bittersweet smile. That was something I'd noticed about him over the last few weeks. Sometimes, for just a moment, I could see this deep, wounded layer beneath all the smiles and laughs and jokes. I wanted to wrap him in my arms and hold him tight to make sure nothing bad ever happened to him again.

I raised my hands in surrender. " *Okay* . You made your point. Some country music is good."

Clay grinned wide, showing his perfect teeth, all traces of sadness gone. "And I successfully distracted you so you'd stop bitching." Clay raised his hand toward the end of the trail. "We're here."

"Beauty and brains." I clicked my tongue. "Who'd've thought it?"

When I glanced over, Clay's cheeks were pink. I wasn't sure they had been before, but maybe he was just getting overheated. That had to be it.

Clay wrapped his hand around mine and pulled me forward to a three-foot stone wall.

I was too distracted by him holding my hand to care about anything else. I didn't even look until Clay said, "Totally worth it, right?"

I lifted my eyes. We stood on the precipice of a cliff; the forest stretched out beneath us. I hadn't even realized we'd been climbing uphill this whole time. That explained the difficulty.

"Wow!"

Clay was right. It was amazing. There was no sign of civilization in sight. Trees stretched out for miles to the horizon. There was even a small lake in the distance that I recognized. I had been there before. It was easy to get to. It had a parking lot not even a hundred yards from the shore.

Clay looked at me, beaming with joy. He was so excited; he was practically vibrating. "What do you think?"

"Totally worth it," I said, still highly aware that Clay hadn't let go of my hand yet.

As soon as I had the thought, Clay pulled his hand free and removed his backpack, moving over to sit on the lonely bench. He took out a thermos, two Tupperware containers, and a large bag of Spicy Nacho Doritos—my favorite.

It was a picnic. Clay made us a picnic.

"And for dessert." Clay pulled out a bag of Sour Patch Kids—also one of my all-time favorites.

I stared at him, stunned.

Clay opened the containers and offered one to me. "I know it's not exactly a hoagie, but it's the best I could do. My mom forgot to buy the right kind of bread I asked for."

I furrowed my brow as I walked over and took the bowl holding a sandwich. The fact that he asked his mother to buy a specific bread to make these sandwiches seemed like more than just a friendly gesture. Although, I had no clue why the bread even mattered. "You lost me."

"Our list," Clay said. "After go-karts and Mexican. We've already done pizza and mini golf. A hoagie and a hike is all that was left."

I cracked a smile. I completely forgot about that.

Clay was too adorable for words. How was I supposed to not fall for a guy who did things like that for me? It seemed colossally unfair.

Chapter 16 - I Want the One I Can't Have

- *Clay* -

It was mid-morning on Sunday when my phone dinged with a new message. I picked it up and immediately started smiling.

EMMETT: *Hey. Are you busy?*

CLAY: *Nope.*

Normally, at this time on Sundays, me and the guys would go out to the ATV track, or fishing, or even just hang around one of our houses. I couldn't remember why Sunday had become our obligatory "Bro Time" as Brandon dubbed it; it had just been that way for years. But not today. Brandon was usually the main instigator of Bro Time, and he was out shopping with his mom for a brand new school wardrobe, despite having two full walk-in closets of clothes. He rarely wore anything more than a few times, yet he refused to get rid of anything.

Jackson was also busy spending the day with Carrie, since they probably wouldn't get much time together in the next few days, as school started tomorrow for us.

I was secretly glad when I got their messages last night. I wanted to relax today. The first-day-of-school nerves were mixing with my I-definitely-positively-think-I-might-have-gay-feelings-for-my-friend nerves, which was a recipe destined to make my anxiety flare up if I didn't keep calm.

But just the thought of being with Emmett for a little while made all of that disappear.

EMMETT: *Do you want to hang out?*

And there it was. The opening for Emmett Time. I chewed on my lip, an uncontrollable grin took over my face.

CLAY: *Sure.*

EMMETT: *Should I come to you or...*

CLAY: *B there n 5.*

EMMETT:

I scurried around my room, grabbing clothes to throw on. I chose my plaid gray shorts and the powder blue Port United shirt Brandon gave me a few months ago when I saw it on his bed and mentioned that I liked it. It still had the tags on it when Brandon tossed it at me and told me to take it. Forty dollars for a plain t-shirt with a tiny lighthouse logo on the chest. I tried to deny the offer, but he said if I didn't take it, he'd throw it away to spite me. As soon as I tried it on, I knew it was a size smaller than anything I'd buy for myself. Brandon was leaner than me. We both worked out a lot, but Brandon did it for appearance's sake, to have a sculpted physique; I did it because it helped to ease my stress—the muscles were a nice bonus.

I tried to use the sizing issue as an excuse to refuse it, but Brandon said, "It's the perfect size. You just don't know how to dress properly. Seriously, you have a killer body, bro. Embrace it. Give the ladies a show."

I chose the shirt today because Brandon was right, as he usually was about such things. I always seemed to get extra attention from girls while wearing it. And I kind of secretly hoped that Emmett would appreciate it, too. Maybe I could make Emmett see me in a desirable way. Emmett fell for Duke. Me and Duke had similar builds. Okay, so maybe Duke had larger muscles, and he was like four inches taller than me, but it was possible.

Right?

That's also why I put on a spritz of the Burberry cologne my parents got me last Christmas. I didn't used to wear cologne much, but being around Emmett, who always smelled of some sweet perfume-y scent, I felt the need

to smell nice. I had to stop myself from putting some on yesterday for our hike. That would've been too weird.

I pushed my feet into my favorite Nikes, already tied for the perfect level of comfort and fit. I slipped out through the back door in my room, hoping to avoid my parents, neither of whom worked on Sundays.

"Hi, sweetheart." The sound of my mom's voice startled me.

I spun around to see my parents sitting on the bench swing, both of them holding glasses of sweet tea. I gave a tentative two-finger wave with the hand holding my keys. "Um, hey."

"You look nice," Mom said.

I rubbed my hand up and down my arm, feeling self-conscious about the outfit now. It was totally overkill compared to my usual attire.

"Thanks."

"Going somewhere special?" Dad asked. His metal straw clinked against his glass as he stirred it around, causing a mini whirlpool among the ice cubes and a sprig of mint that Mom used as a garnish for the tea. She was big on presentation of food and drinks. She believed appearance was an important part of the experience. Also, the mint tasted great in her tea.

"I'm just going to hang out with Emmett. Sort of a last hurrah before school drains me of my will to live."

They both laughed softly. My mom leaned against her husband. "Well, have fun. But remember, it is a school night. That eight o'clock curfew kicks in starting tonight."

I nodded, huffing in annoyance. "You know all my friends have at least until nine. Brandon doesn't even have a curfew."

Mom sat forward, raising a single eyebrow. "Well, Brandon's parents have voted for every Republican presidential candidate for the last twenty-five years. I'd hardly call them role models of wisdom or sanity."

"Fine." I waved at them. "See ya later."

They chorused out a goodbye as I headed to the gate to circle around the house to my car. My excitement was building with each step closer to being with Emmett again.

Emmett rushed out of his house the moment I pulled up. I didn't even have time to pick up my phone to text him that I had arrived. He was wearing a gray t-shirt with *WHAT'S YOUR DAMAGE?* printed across the front, with two croquet mallets forming an X behind the words. He also wore very tight jeans and red high-top Converse that weren't laced all the way up, so the top edges flopped haphazardly outwards as he walked. His black hair was free of any product, his bangs hung over his forehead.

He's so cute!

I was already smiling before Emmet even got in the car. He closed the door, turning to me, offering a bright grin of his own. "Hi."

"Hi."

Emmett scrunched his forehead, looking down at the dashboard screen. "You have the weirdest taste in music for an eighteen-year-old, you know that?"

"You know I won't be eighteen until December. And how is it weird?"

"I never know what decade I'm going to get when I get in your car. Last time you were blasting Queen. I've heard you play Boyz II Men, Blondie, and The Killers. Now this. I don't even know who this is."

"The Smiths."

"Okay. Like, I've never even heard of them."

"They're great. And most of my musical taste comes from my dad. When he got really sick and weak, and he couldn't really get around much, we would lay down on the floor—he said it made him feel better—and he'd play all his favorite songs from the surround sound. He loved music. He had stuff from like every decade." I turned to stare at my hands gripping the steering wheel. I'd never told anyone this before. My mother and Rachel were the only people who knew, and only because they were there. Rachel probably didn't even remember it. She was barely seven when he died. "After he died, I took his old iPod and listened to every song like a thousand times. And somewhere along the way, his music just sort of became my music."

When I looked up, Emmett was smiling at me. "That's really sweet."

I shrugged, pulling the car away from the curb. "I mean, I do like contemporary stuff too. I have Billie Eilish, Khalid—who I found because of Billie. I also have some Taylor in there. Kendrick Lamar. Twenty-One Pilots. Um, Troye Sivan."

"You like Troye?" Emmett looked astounded, with wide eyes and his mouth hanging open.

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I?"

"You do know he sings about guys, right?"

I narrowed my eyes and glanced at Emmett as we came to the stop sign at the end of the street. "Seeing as how I've listened to all of his songs, I'd be pretty fucking stupid if I didn't."

"And you still like him?"

"Of course. I love his voice." I shook my head, slightly annoyed by the implication that I wouldn't like someone's music if they were gay. But I suppose Emmett's thinking was somewhat valid. There were lots of guys around here that would actively dislike a singer if they knew he was gay. Too concerned with their fragile masculinity, to enjoy a song about a man loving another man.

Since there was no one behind us at the stop sign, I picked up my phone and searched for a song. I clicked Play Next on it and set my phone back down before making the turn.

"Besides," I continued, "I listen to a lot of female artists and they sing about guys. I see no difference. Except obviously I'm not a woman." I thought about adding that I wasn't into guys, but I couldn't bring myself to say it. It wasn't true. It couldn't be, considering all the things I'd fantasized about doing with Emmett. At the very least, I had to be bisexual. Although, I wasn't sure if that was true either. I'd never wanted a girl the way I wanted Emmett. I'd never wanted anyone the way I wanted Emmett.

I grinned as "Heather" started and Emmett shouted, "Oh my God! You listen to Conan Gray, too! Who even are you right now?"

Chapter 17 - Gorgeous

- *Emmett* -

I tried not to stare at Clay in that tight baby blue t-shirt. His very nicely defined pecs, his flat stomach slowly rising and falling with every breath, his abdomen constricting with laughter at the movie. And his arms, where his sleeves barely reached the top of his biceps, which flexed every time he brought a handful of popcorn up to his mouth. Thank God the theater was too dark for Clay to notice me ogling him like a creep. He had worn clingy clothes before, and I knew he had an impressive body, but today it just seemed so out there, on display.

I wasn't the only one to notice. The girl at the concession stand stared at Clay lustfully, though he barely gave her a second glance as he ordered our popcorn and a drink for us to share. Clay reasoned that it would be much cheaper to get one jumbo sized cup, which came with free refills, than to buy two smaller drinks that were one-and-done. We'd shared a water bottle on the hike yesterday, and we shared food all the time, so it made sense.

When the movie let out and Clay rattled on about the plot not making much sense, I just let him talk. Partly to hear his smooth, honeyed voice, and partly because I barely knew what was happening on the screen the whole time. And not just because of all the leering. I'd also been watching Clay's hand to time my popcorn grabs perfectly so our hands would brush together in the bucket. We both whispered apologies the first couple times, but as it kept happening, we gave up the niceties. I suspected Clay didn't care that much, and I didn't want to keep drawing attention to it, worried he might realize that I was doing it on purpose.

"But I mean I laughed a lot," Clay said, "and it was a comedy, so I guess that's the most important thing."

"Yeah. I know what you mean." I only laughed along with everyone else to keep up the pretense of watching the movie.

"Are you hungry?" Clay raised his wrist to look at his watch, making his bicep flex again. "It's almost two. And I'm starving."

"I could definitely eat," I lied. I was mostly full on popcorn, but I would take any excuse to spend more time with him.

Chapter 18 - I Want to Hold Your Hand

- *Clay* -

We ended up at the Chinese restaurant down the street. I looked over the menu, even though I always ate one of three things when I got Chinese food. "Do you ever want to try something new, but you're not sure where to start?"

I was taken aback by how relevant my statement was to my life recently. There was a huge new thing I wanted to try, but I did not know how to go about initiating it. Not that I even could, since it heavily involved Emmett, who had made it abundantly clear that he had no interest in going down that road with me.

"How about you get your favorites, and I'll get mine, then we can share?" Emmett offered.

I smiled at him. "Sounds perfect."

We each picked out three dishes we loved, along with a few items we both enjoyed, for a smorgasbord that left us both stuffed and slightly nauseous.

In the car I stretched out my belly, which was already swollen from eating so much. I laid my hands on it and looked over at Emmett, who had closed his eyes. "Emmett."

Emmett rolled his head across the headrest to face me, opening his eyes. He laughed. "Have you got something to tell me, Clay?"

"Yes. I do." I feigned a sniffle and wiped away an imaginary tear from beneath my eye. "My child needs a father, Emmett. I can't be a single parent."

Emmett reached over to rub my stomach. "We'll get through this together." He stared into my eyes, trying for a serious expression, but his lips kept quivering, like he wanted to smile.

My smile fell away as I wondered what Emmett would do if I just leaned forward and kissed him right now.

I shook off that thought and faced forward, shifting in my seat uncomfortably. "Um, so what do you want to do now?"

Emmett settled back into his seat. "Have my stomach pumped, for starters. I ate way too many potstickers."

"Dude, I had like seven. And three egg rolls."

"I ate almost all the sesame chicken by myself."

"Well, I ate most of the pepper steak."

"You want to just go home and crash?" Emmett asked.

I was deeply disappointed, assuming he meant we should go to our own homes separately.

Then he said, "We could watch TV or a movie."

I forced my body to stay still, withholding my excitement. "Sounds perfect."

As I drove back to our neighborhood, I asked, "Can we go to your house? My parents are home, and they're so weird."

"Your parents are awesome."

"That's because you're not their son. They'd be all nosy. And my mom will come in every ten minutes to make sure we don't want snacks or drinks."

"That sounds amazing."

"It's annoying as hell."

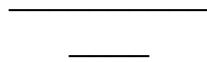
"Fine." Emmett placed a hand on my forearm, giving me a thrill. I swear the hairs on my arm stood on end at his touch. "For the sake of your sanity and our unborn child, we can go to my house. My mom will be so stoked to hear the news."

I laughed. "Okay. We're done with that joke now."

"And I was so looking forward to being a teen dad."

I rolled my eyes. I picked up my phone and removed the aux cable, handing it over to Emmett. "Here. Play me some of your music."

I was not at all surprised when "Cruel Summer" by Taylor Swift started playing. But I loved that song, so I turned it up, feeling the rattle of the bass in my bones. I rolled down the windows, cranking the volume. The wind whipped through our hair as we both belted out the lyrics at the top of our lungs.



Back at Emmett's house, we laid in his bed, side-by-side (with two inches of empty space separating us), and watched through a couple movies. First up was *Kiki's Delivery Service*, which Emmett remembered me mentioning that first day I came over. Watching it now, I understood why I loved it so much as a kid. Rachel and I used to wrap dark colored sheets around ourselves and tie red ribbons in our hair to run around the house with a broom between our legs, "delivering" random objects to our parents.

Although, I also remembered why I stopped watching it. I tried to get Jackson to watch it, but he said it was boring and needed more action. I felt embarrassed for having ever liked it in the first place. I guess that tainted my memory of the film. The next time Rachel wanted to play delivery service, I said it was a dumb game for babies. That I never wanted to play it again.

Next, Emmett insisted we had to watch *Clueless* , after he scrolled past it and I mentioned I'd never seen it. For a 90s movie about rich, vapid teenagers, it turned out much better than I anticipated. I even kind of felt a little spark for Paul Rudd with his scruffy, grunge look. That was an exciting development.

As the end credits started, Emmett shook his head. "It's such a brilliant adaptation."

"Of what?"

" *Emma* . By Jane Austen."

"Oh. I've never read it. It was a movie, too, right?"

"Um, yes." Emmett almost sounded offended by the question. "There are two movies, actually, and a miniseries. I've seen them all. Multiple times."

"Is it that good?"

"I love Jane Austen. And I'd probably get punched in the face by any other Austen fan for saying this, but I totally think *Emma* is better than *Pride & Prejudice* ." Emmett's eyes widened as he sat up and grabbed my arm, looking slightly nervous. "Don't get me wrong! I still totally love *Pride & Prejudice* . There's just something so charming about *Emma* ."

I wondered if Emmett actually thought I would care that much if he preferred one of those over the other. It wasn't that I didn't care about his opinion, I just had no idea why that opinion might be questionable.

Still, I loved watching him nerd out over these classic novels I'd only heard mentioned at school. He really loved this stuff, and his passion for it was very attractive.

When Emmett laid back down to scroll through the selection (an inch closer than before, I might add), I stretched my leg out over his. "Is this... Is this okay? I kinda have a cramp in my thigh." I rubbed my leg, which felt perfectly fine, as part of my act. "I need to get into a different position."

Emmett shook his head. "No. It's fine. I don't mind."

I pointed at the TV as *Bridesmaids* came up. "I love that movie."

"It is kind of on brand for our evening of strong female characters so far."

"Okay," I said.

I didn't really understand what Emmett meant by that. I didn't get how Cher or the ladies of *Bridesmaids* were strong. They weren't badass action heroes or anything. Certainly no Wonder Woman or Sarah Connor. I got how Emmett could say that about Kiki. She was a witch. The others were just normal women.

When I said this to Emmett, he got really animated. His brain seemed to work faster than his mouth, so he stumbled over his words a few times.

"No. They're not strong, like as in having powers or even physically. They're strong because they're well-rounded, well-developed characters who are more than just a one-dimensional set piece, just there to be pretty or to serve the male characters' development."

"I guess I never thought of it like that," I said.

"Well, I'm happy to enlighten you."

Emmett turned on the movie and laid the remote down. After about ten minutes, Emmett laid his hand on my leg. He was still staring at the movie, so I assumed he'd done it without thinking. Just that simple move caused way too much pleasure, getting me halfway hard in seconds. I didn't even know it could happen that quickly for me. Any time Summer initiated sex, it took several minutes and much cajoling to get me this far. Emmett did it in two seconds flat by touching my fucking thigh.

I grabbed a throw pillow to cover my lap, propping my arms on top of it to make it seem as though I was just trying to get comfortable.

Emmett glanced over for a moment and smiled before turning his attention back to the movie, laughing at the scene.

I kept thinking about trying something. Something simple and noncommittal, maybe taking Emmett's hand. My heart pounded, imagining lacing my fingers with his. But I couldn't do something that bold. Instead, I started slowly leaning towards him. Every couple of minutes, I got just a little closer, closing the gap until I finally rested my head on his shoulder. My whole body was on high alert, buzzing with a mix of terror and exhilaration. I expected Emmett might say something or buck me off, because any of my other friends definitely would have if I tried this with them, but not Emmett. Emmett just laid his cheek against the top of my head, continuing to watch the movie as if this were the most natural thing in the world. And it truly felt like it was.

Chapter 19 - Play the Game

- *Clay* -

"I just don't get it, dude," Brandon said, handing his credit card to the young woman at the checkout. He had dragged me to the outlet mall to buy a limited edition pair of tennis shoes that cost nearly three hundred dollars. The hideous neon shoes would probably get worn a max of twice— *if that*—and be relegated to the back of his shoe closet with the rest of the exclusive, rare, or one-of-a-kind pairs that he couldn't live without.

"There's nothing to get," I said. I just wanted to leave the store. I hated the sharp, heavy scent of new leather and that disinfectant spray they put in the shoes to make sure no one was passing along their foot fungus to some poor unsuspecting soul.

Although, I didn't want to bump into Summer. She passed the storefront a few minutes ago, which was how we got onto this subject. Something I'd very much rather drop.

Brandon leaned back against the tall desk, propping his elbows up behind him. "You dated her for like three months. You guys really seemed to have a lot in common. What was the problem?"

"It just didn't work out." I examined the display on the counter to lure in impulse purchasers. I didn't want to keep rehashing my breakup. I thought I was done with this. "I don't even know why you care so much."

"Because I want you to be happy, man." Brandon tapped the back of his hand against my chest. "Just tell me. Was it the sex?"

I sucked in a breath. I looked at the salesclerk, her eyes already trained on me. Averting her gaze, she typed something into the register, swiping Brandon's card.

I stared at the carpet, bringing my foot back to balance it on the toe of my shoe, twisting it back and forth. My cheeks burned, surely turning my face a more audacious shade of maroon than the laces on Brandon's ugly shoes.

"Thank you for shopping with us," the salesclerk said, handing Brandon his receipt and his card. She looked directly at me when she said, "Come again soon."

Brandon barely acknowledged her before he flipped around and started walking toward the exit. I followed right on his heels.

"Excuse me," the cashier said, much too close than she ought to be.

We both stopped and turned. I assumed Brandon forgot something until the young woman offered one of the store's business cards to me. She had written her name and phone number above the store's name. "If you ever want to maybe hang out sometime, call me."

My mouth dropped open. I took the card, almost on autopilot. I didn't know what else to do. It would be rude to shove it back at her.

She smiled at me and whirled around, running back to her post.

Brandon threw his arm around my neck, laughing. He turned me around and dragged me out of the store into the heat. "You lucky son of a bitch. I was gonna come back through later and get her number for myself."

I flicked my hand out to the side, offering him the card. "Now you have it."

"Are you serious? You're not going to call her?" He clearly thought I was foolish for ignoring a sure-thing. I mean, yeah, she was pretty. But I wasn't attracted to her. I barely noticed her before I caught her staring at me.

"No!"

"It's been like a month since Summer dumped you. It's time to move on. Or at least have some awesome rebound sex. You just need to fuck someone new, and you'll be all good."

"I don't want to fuck someone new," I said, far too loudly.

Two gray-haired women walking past us offered matching disgruntled scowls of disapproval. I withered under their glares, stuffing my hands into my pockets, my shoulders slouching forward.

Brandon pulled away, sighing. "If you're still this bummed out over her, then why not try to fix things. I bet she'd take you back. I sit next to her in history and she's always staring at the back of your head."

I couldn't seem to make him understand. So, I put it as plainly as I knew how: "I don't want her back. I believe this is what's best for both of us. We weren't right for each other."

"That's what I don't get, though. You guys were always the ones having the most fun at every party. You had all those little inside jokes. And those stupid pet names. What am I missing?"

I wish I could tell him he was missing the fact that I was massively into someone else. But I couldn't say that. Brandon was the type to pry until he got all the details. If I said I had feelings for someone, he would hound me until I cracked. I certainly couldn't tell him I wanted to date a guy. A guy who was the only one who ever made me feel like a normal person.

"Can you just chill with the third degree, Bran? It didn't work out. That's all that matters."

Brandon shrugged. "Whatever. But she's not gonna be single forever, bro. She's hot. Some dude's going to come along and you'll be shit out of luck."

"I hope she does find someone else. I want her to be happy."

Brandon raised his arm to hang his bag over his back, shaking his head. "I just don't get you sometimes, man."

That made two of us.

A moment later, Brandon patted my arm to get my attention and pointed down the walkway. "Hey, isn't that your friend?"

As always, the sight of Emmett brought me an overwhelming rush of joy. I could feel my lips stretching into a grin without even thinking about it. He wore a well-fitted white t-shirt with *REP* printed across the chest, paired with tight black capri pants and checkerboard slip-on Vans.

Emmett hadn't noticed me yet. He was busy chatting with a redheaded girl I had never met. I suspected this was the Makenzie girl he'd mentioned a couple times.

I finally turned to look at Brandon, who was staring at me. My smile melted, leaving my lips hanging open. My chest constricted as all my breath escaped. I didn't know how long I'd been staring at Emmett. Or how long Brandon had been watching me stare at Emmett.

"What?" I asked, feigning a calmness I did not even remotely feel.

"Do you want to go say hi?" If Brandon suspected anything, there was no hint of it in his voice. But why would he suspect anything? He thought I was straight. That's why he kept pushing me back to an existence of passionless numbness.

"I thought you wanted to shop," I said, seeking an excuse to escape. I worried Brandon might see through my facade. I was kind of nervous that he may have already.

Brandon showed me his bag, patting the box inside. "These are all I really wanted. Plus, I mostly just wanted to hang out with you."

"Oh." I chewed on my lip. Brandon's candor surprised me. I felt bad about being so annoyed that he finagled me into this outing when I just wanted to go home and take a nap after school let out. "I mean, I can see him anytime."

"You don't want to be rude to your friend though."

I glanced at Emmett. He had stopped walking. He was staring right at us with a huge smile. He waved when his eyes locked onto mine.

I offered a small embarrassed wave in return. I couldn't show too much enthusiasm. It was like that scene in *Breaking Dawn: Part 1* where Bella is laying on the table still as a statue, but inside she's writhing in pain. Except on the inside, I was jumping up and down, screaming for joy.

"Now it really would be rude to ignore him," Brandon said, walking faster toward Emmett and the girl.

I kept pace beside my friend, pushing my hands into my pockets.

"Hey!" Emmett sounded extremely chipper.

"Hey," I said, trying to remain reserved and cool.

Emmett furrowed his brows, his smile faltering. Probably confused by my flippant attitude. Typically, I acted just as excited to see him.

"We never really officially met," Brandon said, introducing himself to Emmett.

"Nice to meet you." Emmett and Brandon shook hands. Emmett gestured to the tall, slender girl, who looked like she could be a ballerina. "This is my friend, Makenzie."

Brandon scanned Makenzie, offering his charming grin, his interest piqued. "And here I thought I knew all the beautiful girls in town."

Makenzie puckered her already pouty lips, batting her lashes. The attraction was obviously mutual.

"What are y'all up to?" I asked Emmett, noticing the choker around his neck. That was a brave choice. Wearing something like that around here was equivalent to holding a neon sign over his head blinking "GAY."

And maybe it was a little bit sexy on him. Maybe a little more than a little. Honestly, having the confidence to even wear something like that was a tremendous turn on.

"We were just headed down to grab a bite to eat." Emmett pointed to the restaurant down the way.

"Mind if we join?" Brandon asked, his eyes locked on Makenzie. "I'm starved."

"The more the merrier, I always say," Makenzie said.

"Yeah, that's like her catchphrase," Emmett said sarcastically. Neither Makenzie nor Brandon seemed to notice. It made me chuckle.

Brandon tore his eyes away from her, turning to me. "You're hungry, right, bro?" Though it sounded like a question, and he'd phrased it like a question, it was definitely not a question. I knew Brandon well enough to know that tone. The only acceptable answer was, "Yes."

While Makenzie and Brandon sauntered ahead, trading flirtatious remarks, Emmett and I trailed behind. Mostly because I was dragging my feet. If asked, I would say it was to give Brandon time to close the deal with Makenzie. Truthfully, I wanted time alone with Emmett. Possibly make up for being standoffish.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in forever," I said.

It was three days, to be exact. Now that I was back at school, free time was harder to come by. It didn't help that Emmett had been busy every time I called. I was starting to think he was avoiding me.

"I know. Sorry about that."

"Are you still pissed at me for taking you hiking? I thought after we hung out on Sunday, you'd forgiven me for my impudence. I wouldn't want to be on your grudge list with that stingy lunch lady."

Emmett gave one of his rare genuine laughs. "I was never pissed. Just mildly annoyed."

"You called it homophobic, Emmett."

"We've known each other for almost a month, so by now you should know that I'm a lazy bitch who exaggerates for dramatic effect."

His statement surprised me so much, I burst out laughing, which made our friends look back at us. I blew out a breath to calm myself. I waited until Makenzie and Brandon became distracted to speak again: "I shouldn't have sprung that on you. I just thought you'd like the view."

"I did. It was amazing." Emmett reached his hand up to curl his fingers around my elbow, almost like he wanted to lock arms with me the way he had been with Makenzie. But he immediately dropped his hand back to his side. I missed the weight of his touch the moment it vanished.

I stared down at the ground, my eyes tracing a hairline crack in the pavement. I hoped the blush taking over my face wasn't evident in the bright sunlight.

The restaurant was part sports bar, part arcade. It was basically a low-rent Dave and Buster's knockoff. Huge televisions hung on every wall, playing every game in every sport currently airing. It smelled like smoky charcoal and beer. As the hostess (dressed in the equivalent of a sexy referee Halloween costume) showed us to our table, Brandon pulled me back. "Bro, take Emmett to play a game or something."

"Why?"

Brandon gave me an annoyed look. "I want to work on Makenzie. Unless you want a shot."

I shook my head. "She's all yours."

After putting in the order for drinks and some appetizers, I asked Emmett to follow me over to the arcade section.

The lunch crowd had long since gone, and the happy hour crew hadn't yet shown up, so the place was practically deserted. We had our choice of games.

Emmett pummeled me at skee ball, but he couldn't get the hang of the free throw basketball game.

"I suck!" Emmett grunted as the buzzer went off, ending his turn with zero points.

I loaded the machine with more tokens. "You just have poor form." I took a shot. The ball swished through the hoop and a bell sounded as the point counter switched to one.

"How do you do that?"

I had an idea. It was probably dumb and very corny, and it certainly pushed all the boundaries of male friendship, but I couldn't help myself. "I can show you." I held the ball out to Emmett.

When Emmett stepped in front of the game, ball in hand, I got behind him and pressed my chest against his shoulders. He turned his head slightly to meet my eyes. "What now?"

"Are you right or left-handed?"

"Left."

"Okay. Spread your legs a little more. Bring this one back a bit." I gripped Emmett's right leg, pulling it back so his left foot was slightly forward.

"Raise your arms," I said softly.

Emmett did as he was told. I instructed him on proper hand and arm positioning, laying my hand on top of his on the ball. Another inch closer and our cheeks would touch. "Now push the ball forward with your wrist so that it makes an arc. And just let the ball roll off your fingertips."

Emmett took the shot. The ball sailed through the hoop. I wrapped my arms tightly around him, shaking him in celebration. "You did it!"

Emmett laughed, gripping my forearms. "I think that was mostly you."

"No. *You* did that."

Emmett pulled away and turned to face me. "Do you really think I could've made that without you puppeteering me?"

"Try it."

Emmett picked up another ball and got into position. Without thinking, I stepped up again and put my hands on his hips.

When Emmett released the ball this time, it hit the backboard and bounced against the rim before dropping to the bottom and spiraling into the collection hole. Emmett twisted his waist toward me and grinned. "See?"

"You gotta admit, that was much closer than any of your previous attempts."

Emmett rolled his eyes. He draped his arm across my shoulder, bringing his face very close to mine. We were almost in the perfect position to kiss.

"Whatever you say."

"Hey, guys," Brandon said, drawing our attention from our bantering, which I thought felt very flirty. Or maybe I was just projecting that onto the situation because that's what I wanted it to be.

I dropped my hands and took a step back, out of Emmett's reach. "I was teaching him how to shoot baskets."

"Food's here." Brandon pointed his thumb over his shoulder before turning away and heading back to the table.

Emmett smiled at me again as we followed Brandon. I barely said a word throughout the meal, offering monosyllabic answers whenever they caught me without food in my mouth. I ate way too much, trying to avoid having to speak.

After we finished, Brandon and I went back to his truck, while Makenzie and Emmett headed off to check out the sales they came for. The blazing leather seats seared the backs of my legs. Sweat drenched my back to

combat the scorching leather. I nearly burned my finger when I pulled out the seatbelt hook.

"Emmett's pretty cool," Brandon said, cranking the engine. A blast of warm air shot from the vents before instantly turning cold.

"Yeah," I mumbled, giving a half shrug.

"Did you know he's gay?"

My head snapped to the side to stare at Brandon. All the air escaped my lungs at once. A chill shot through my veins despite the heat. "Why?"

Did Brandon know? Could he sense my feelings? Had he seen the way I held Emmett much too close during that free throw tutorial? He definitely saw the affectionate aftermath.

"Makenzie told me when I asked if her and him were a thing. I just didn't know if you knew."

"I did. But it doesn't matter to me. Does it bother you?"

My question was more about gauging Brandon's thoughts on the subject than about Emmett personally. After all, I had been having some seriously not-so-straight thoughts lately. I wondered if my friend would still accept me if he knew about it.

Brandon shrugged. "I honestly couldn't care less who someone else wants to fuck. As long as I get mine."

"Speaking of which," I said. I couldn't bring myself to talk about this anymore. I was having palpitations, which would soon lead to a panic attack if I didn't get my mind off it. "You and Makenzie. Is that a thing?"

"Might be. I got her number." Brandon cracked a mischievous smile and glanced over at me before turning his eyes back to the road. "She's seriously hot, right?"

She was a beautiful girl, but, like the salesclerk and Summer, she did nothing for me.

Still, I couldn't let the question go unanswered. Especially not after what we'd just talked about and what Brandon saw, even if it was innocent. So, I mumbled, "Totally."

Chapter 20 - I'm Only Me When I'm With You

- *Emmett* -

I was reading on my bed when my bedroom door burst open. Clay bounded in, kicking the door closed behind him. It had been two weeks since the day at the arcade. Keeping my feelings at bay had become an increasingly challenging task. Not only was Clay thoughtful, he was goofy and fun. And have I mentioned extremely hot?

Another thing I'd discovered about Clay: he was very touchy-feely. He was always resting his head on my shoulder or throwing his legs over mine. He'd even gotten into the sublime habit of stroking my hair whenever we watched movies alone together—always in my bed. The first time it happened, I was so shocked I jerked my head away, which I instantly regretted. Especially seeing how freaked out Clay became, apologizing profusely. "I wasn't... I wasn't even thinking. It just kind of happened. I fidget a lot and... and it-it was just there. And I'm so sorry."

I grabbed his hands. "I'm sorry. I just wasn't expecting it." I studied his face. "But it was nice. You could totally do it again. You know, like, if you wanted."

Clay scrunched his face, still apprehensive. "That wouldn't be weird?"

"I mean, only if we let it be weird." Just to make him feel better about it, I added, "And it's not like I'm into you or anything. It's just a friend thing. Carrie does it all the time."

"Um, okay." Clay put his arm around me, and I nestled my head into the crook of his neck as he raked his fingers across my scalp. It was the most amazing sensation. Made all the better because it was Clay.

By the end of every movie, we were cuddling, with one of us having our arms wrapped around the other. And, of course, Clay's fingers running through my hair.

Clay toed off his Nikes and laid down next to me with his head at the opposite end of the bed, propping himself on the mound of crumpled blankets I kicked off this morning.

"Hey," I said, turning my attention back to the dreadfully boring novel I was reading for class.

Clay nudged my elbow with his socked foot. I glanced down to see that he was wearing the novelty Superman socks with the cape on the back that I joked about when we went shopping last weekend. I called them godawful monstrosities and questioned the sanity of anyone who would purchase them. Clay took that as a challenge and bought them on the spot with a spiteful grin that frankly got me a little too excited.

Clay continued to prod me, clearly seeking attention.

I stuck my finger between the pages to keep my place and held the book up to show him. "I have to finish reading this. I'm supposed to write an essay on its symbolism."

"How the hell do you already have an essay? Your school only started back like a week ago."

"I take AP classes. And this is due in two days. So, please let me concentrate."

"That's forty-eight whole hours." Clay dropped his head back against the blankets with a loud sigh. "You can knock that out in no time. Hell, I'll even help."

"I'm only halfway through, and it's really not grabbing me, so my mind keeps drifting off, and I end up having to reread entire pages."

"I'm so bored," Clay whined, rubbing on my leg. He seemed fascinated by my leg hair, sifting his fingers through it very distractingly. I wondered if he knew what that did to me. The way it sent shivers up my spine and blood rushing south. I shifted my hips slightly, hoping my shorts wouldn't give away my secret.

I cleared my throat. "You're not a toddler. Entertain yourself."

"Come on, Em."

"You have other friends. What are they doing?"

"I don't like them as much you."

That gave me a special kind of thrill that only Clay seemed to evoke. But I couldn't take the words too seriously. It would only lead to more disappointment.

I raised the book to block my view of him. I hoped he would take the hint.

A moment later, something cold slid across my ankle. I thought I'd imagined it until I felt it again. I dropped the book against my chest and glared at Clay, whose arms were folded behind his head, his biceps flexing with the effort.

"Is something wrong?" Clay asked, a devious twinkle in his eye.

"What did you just do?"

He raised his brows, trying for a look of innocence. "What do you mean?"

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously before returning to my studying. I scanned the pages, looking for the spot where I'd left off.

Then I felt it again. My eyes snapped up in time to see Clay adjusting the hem of his shirt.

"Whatever you're doing—" I gritted my teeth "— *stop it !*"

Grinning mischievously, Clay shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm not kidding, Clay. Cut it out."

" *I'm* not kidding, Emmett." Clay mocked my serious tone. "You're delirious."

I rolled my eyes, once again focusing on the book. I groaned. "You made me lose my place. *Again* !"

"Maybe you just need a break."

When the cold thing stroked the bottom of my foot, it hit a ticklish spot and my whole leg spasmed. I tossed the book aside and launched at Clay, intent on finding whatever tool he was using to mess with me.

I dug around in the covers, to no avail, all while Clay giggled with delight. "Your mind is clearly playing tricks on you, Em. I'm really worried about you."

I remembered Clay fussing with his shirt earlier. "You've got it on you, don't you?"

"Got what?" Clay raised his hands, as if surrendering. "I think you're losing it, dude."

I pushed Clay's shirt up. Nothing but tantalizing toned muscles flexing beneath his suntanned skin with every laugh.

I looked Clay over. "What did you do with it, Clay?"

"I don't have anything," Clay said, feigning innocence. The look in his eyes told a different story.

"Are you gonna make me strip-search you?"

Clay beamed with devilish glee, holding his arms out wide. "Do what you've gotta do."

I slid my hands along Clay's sides to make sure he wasn't concealing it beside him. Coming up empty-handed, I moved on to a pat down.

Clay laughed, enjoying my frustration way too much. "I always thought it took buying dinner and flowers to get this kind of action."

I pressed my lips together, sharply exhaling through my nostrils. Angry—and a little turned on—I grabbed the blanket under Clay and yanked it with all my might, sending Clay toppling over the edge.

However, Clay grabbed my arm and brought me down, too. We ended up in a heap on the floor, twisted up in the blanket. Somehow, Clay was partially on top of me.

Clay threw his leg over me to straddle my waist. If he moved a couple inches south, he'd know exactly how I felt about him. He grabbed my wrists and pinned them above my head.

"Just tell me what you were doing," I pleaded.

Clay leaned down, his face drifting extremely close to mine. So close I could feel his warm breath against my lips. With a hint of a grin, he released his hold on me and reached under the bed to retrieve something. He brought it out and held it between our faces. It was a pen. A simple, stupid pen. I had been using it earlier to mark passages for my essay before I lost track of it.

Clay smugly raised his eyebrows, placing his hands on the floor on either side of my head. "I told you I didn't have anything on me. You knocked it out of my hand when your leg jumped."

My head dropped to the floor with a thud. "Fuck you."

Bubbly laughter erupted out of Clay. It was an infectious sound that got me laughing, too.

As my laughter died down, I said, "I hate you."

"You say that a lot, but I don't think you really mean it." Clay scrunched his nose adorably.

"Yeah, maybe," I said.

Not thinking, I lowered my arms and rested my hands on Clay's thighs. In the words of Queen Gertrude, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." The lady in question being me in this scenario. If only I could tell him just how much I didn't hate him. How opposite those words were to the truth.

With a huge dopey grin plastered across his face, Clay's brown eyes examined my features, hanging on my lips.

Suddenly, the door flew open. Clay rolled off of me as my mother stepped into the room. He grunted as his back hit against the bedrail.

"I heard a crash," she said. "Is everyone alright?"

I craned my neck, looking at her upside down. "We're fine. We fell off the bed."

"We... W-We were just wrestling," Clay stammered, sounding nervous and guilty. "Sorry."

Mom looked between us, then shook her head. She undoubtedly thought we were idiots. "Just be more careful."

After she left, I raised myself up on my elbows to look at him. "Wrestling?"

"I mean, we were. *Kinda* ." Clay leaned back against the edge of the bed, very deliberately staring at the floor next to me. It was like he couldn't bring himself to see my face.

"Okay." I sat up and loosened the blanket's grip on my legs so I could slide out. I groaned at the sight of the blue pen marks on my ankle and snatched my book off the floor where it had fallen.

Fixing the pillows back the way they were, I returned to my former spot, flipping through the pages to find where I left off.

Clay took his time getting up. He straightened his clothes and looked around the room, examining it as if he might find something he'd never seen

before.

My eyes kept flickering over to him, distracted by the way he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He seemed uncomfortable now.

I finally turned to face him. "Just give me one hour to get at least some of this thing read, then we'll do something fun. I promise."

Clay nodded, much less enthusiastic than before. "Yeah. Sure."

"You can watch TV or something." I grabbed the remote off the bookshelf at the foot of my bed and held it out to Clay.

Clay slowly moved toward the bed, chewing on his bottom lip. He sat on the edge beside me, taking the remote. With the careful, hesitant movements of a skittish animal, he scooted closer until his shoulder pressed against mine.

After a few minutes, Clay's tense muscles relaxed, returning to his normal, carefree self. He adjusted his position so that he could rest his head on my pillow while he stared at the television. It wasn't long before he fell asleep, his head lulling onto my shoulder.

Chapter 21 - Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me

- Clay -

Emmett sat on the countertop in my kitchen while I stood beside him, making him a sandwich out of some truly bizarre items. Who would put marshmallow fluff on a sandwich with salami, pimento cheese, and black olives? But he must've asked for those ingredients because he watched me make it without a word of rebuttal. Actually, he was talking about unicorns and how they come in all different colors. "Some of them can even change their color. Like that horse in The Wizard of Oz ."

"I didn't know that." I said, because I didn't know that.

"They're very pretty." he said. "Not as pretty as you, though."

I blushed because Emmett had never said something like that to me before. I looked up into his green eyes. All shimmery like kaleidoscopes with that golden ring at the center.

"Are you okay?" Emmett asked.

I shook my head. I was not okay. I moved to stand in front of Emmett. Slowly, I stepped forward to stand between his legs, resting my hands on his thighs, the way he did to me that one time in his room after I drew on his foot.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I think you're pretty too."

"I didn't know you were into guys at all. You never said."

I chuckled. "You never asked."

"That was very dumb of me." he said, because that was very dumb of him.

"I've never felt this way about anyone else. I think it's what you're supposed to feel when you... want someone."

"You think you want me?"

I licked my lips before giving a brief nod. "I just wanna try something." I inched closer until I could feel his breath against my lips.

"Okay. If that's what you really want."

My lips gently touched Emmett's for a moment before quickly retreating. "How was that?"

"It was nice." Emmett said, keeping his tone soft.

"Can I try again?"

"Sure."

Moving my hands up to his face, I drew him toward me. Once again, I pressed my lips to his, only this time I didn't pull away. I kissed him for real. And he kissed me back. His fingers curled into my hair. We kissed like we never wanted it to stop. Like we were in love. It was hot and intense and ferocious.

I finally broke away. I giggled when I looked up and saw that Emmett's crown was crooked now. I carefully removed it from his head and set it among the sandwich ingredients, afraid it might break if our kisses continued to be so frenzied.

I brushed my hand across his cheek. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since the night we met. You're the first thing I think about when I wake up. And you're the last thing I think about at night. I never smile more than when I know I'll get to see you. But it's never enough. Every time we're together, I imagine telling you how I feel. I think about the way you'd kiss me, how it would feel to touch you. Or even just to hold your hand, and have you know what it means to me."

Emmett stared at me with all the devotion I longed to see in his eyes every day.

"I want you, Emmett. I want you in every way I can have you."

Without a moment's hesitation, Emmett pulled me into a kiss. I broke away long enough to pull my t-shirt over my head. I pushed him onto his bed in that little cubbyhole surrounded by those royal blue walls. Our little hideaway, where I always felt so safe. The TV hanging above his bookshelf played all the best moments from our friendship. All the memories that played on loop in my mind before going to bed, hoping to dream of him.

Emmett shoved me rather fiercely, knocking me onto my back. He climbed on top of me to continue kissing me. He said my name, which made me smile. Although it sounded too far away. I wrapped my arms tighter around him, hooking a leg around his waist. He was solid and warm. The weight of him laying on me was so reassuring. I leaned into him, rubbing against him, getting very worked up, and not a bit sorry about it.

"Clay!" Emmett said sharply.

I startled, my eyes flying open. I was hugging Emmett. For real. With my leg hooked around his. A pang of fear shot through my chest because I was very hard and very much shoving it against his hip.

I rolled over, sitting up on the edge of the bed. There was no way Emmett didn't feel that. "Oh my God! I'm so sorry." My face burned almost as hot as that time I fell asleep at the lake and got a terrible blistering sunburn. "I didn't realize... I didn't know where I was. Or that you were you."

Even if this situation had resulted from dreams about Emmett, I couldn't let him know that.

"I get it." Emmett didn't sound mad. Actually, he sounded kind of amused. I turned to see that he was almost smiling. "It's not like you can control what you do when you're asleep."

I pounced on that justification, nodding profusely. "Exactly!"

I wanted to tell Emmett that it had nothing to do with him, but I couldn't lie to him like that. I was already lying to him about how I felt. I didn't want to add more lies to the heap if I could avoid it. "Can we please pretend like that never happened?"

"I finished my book if you want to do something." Emmett tossed the book to the end of the bed.

I was grateful that he ignored the awkwardness. My other friends would never let me live it down if I did that to one of them. Of course, I'd never do that to them, because I would never be in this position with any of them. Even when I slept over at their houses, I never would have slept in one of their beds. If there was no spare bed, I'd sleep on the floor or on the couch.

"So, what did you have in mind?" I asked.

"You're the one who's bored." Emmett crawled around me and got up. "You tell me."

I grabbed my shoes and shoved my feet into them, tightening the laces. "How about we just go for a drive? See where we end up."

"Sure."

We went for a late lunch to Emmett's favorite Indian restaurant. He claimed they had the best curry chicken in the county. I—someone who'd never even tasted Indian food—instantly fell in love with it.

"You're always introducing me to new things," I said as we walked through downtown.

I rarely came around here. I liked the interesting juxtaposition of hundred-year-old brick buildings, with wrought iron detailing, mixed in with brand new high rises made of glass and steel. On a few of the side streets, someone had painted beautiful murals along the sides of the windowless walls. One of them stretched for half a block.

"I didn't realize how sheltered and set in my ways I was before I met you."

"I'm glad to help broaden your horizons." Emmett sipped on the iced latte he got from a tiny coffee shop in a building that was once a gas station. They'd created a patio where cars used to pull in to fill up, replacing the gas pumps with flower boxes filled to the brim with a rainbow of diverse flowers.

My mind went to the other thing Emmett had brought out of me—this insatiable longing. I wanted so badly to take his hand as we strolled along. I couldn't do it, but that didn't stop me from walking a little too close occasionally, so my arm or the back of my hand brushed Emmett's, sending sparks across my skin.

When a family approached from the opposite direction, I laid a hand on the small of Emmett's back—okay, maybe it was a little closer to his butt—leaning against him to let the group pass. No one could fault me for that. I was simply being courteous to other pedestrians.

"Do you want the rest of this?" Emmett asked, holding his cup toward me. "I think I'm a little too wired to drink anymore."

I already drank an entire iced coffee of my own, but I just couldn't pass up the chance to put my lips where Emmett's had been. I admit, it was weird, but it was all I had.

"You know, you've also taken me out of my comfort zone," Emmett said. "I never would've gotten in a go-kart if it wasn't for you."

I laughed. "That was a fun day."

I didn't mention the next day. We never talked about that day. I suspected Emmett didn't bring it up because it embarrassed him. Also, the whole Duke thing. He probably didn't like dwelling on it. I didn't bring it up because it was the start of these feelings that brought me nothing but confusion and anxiety—a different sort than I'd previously dealt with.

"We should do that again," Emmett said.

I bumped my shoulder against Emmett's. "I'm going to hold you to that, I hope you know."

Emmett shrugged. "I don't mind."

Chapter 22 - Stay Stay Stay

- *Emmett* -

After Clay dropped me off back at home, I really needed to talk to someone about what happened. Obviously, I chose Carrie. I burst into her house and ran straight to her room.

Carrie was laying the wrong way around on her bed with her feet propped on top of the padded purple velvet headboard. She craned her neck and pushed her curls out of the way to look at me. "What's up?"

"Is it strange if someone grinds on you in their sleep?" I blurted. "Like that doesn't necessarily mean they're into you, right?"

Carrie dropped her legs and spun around to face me. "What?" She rolled her index fingers around each other, like she was trying to rewind the conversation. "Start over. What happened?"

I laid on the bed, throwing my arms over my head, not caring that my shirt had ridden up above my bellybutton. I explained the situation. I didn't mind it when Clay laid an arm over my chest, or even when he threw his leg over mine. Carrie did the same thing when we had sleepovers. She was a very clingy sleeper. I was fine to let Clay nap on me, so I could finish my book in peace. But after about an hour, Clay started mumbling incoherently and moaning. I assumed he was having some kind of sex dream when he hugged me tighter and started grinding his erection against my hip. "I woke him up as soon as I realized what was happening."

"Did he freak out?" Carrie asked.

"A little. At first. But he seems fine now." I sat up to face her. "Things have been so great with him, Care. I don't want him to disappear on me again, like when the four-wheeler thing happened."

"Maybe you should tell him that."

"That wouldn't be awkward?"

"Maybe," she said. "But isn't it worth the discomfort now if it saves your friendship later?"

I nodded and took out my phone to compose a message.

EMMETT: *I know you may feel uncomfortable about what happened today, but you don't have to. It wasn't a big deal at all.*

After sending that, I felt like I needed to add what I said to Carrie.

EMMETT: *Please don't disappear on me again .*

Clay responded immediately.

CLAY: *I won't.*

CLAY: *I promise.*

CLAY: *ur stuck wit me.*

I grinned and showed Carrie the messages. She clapped me on the shoulder. "See what honest communication can get you?"

"Nice way to say, 'I told you so,' without saying the words."

Carrie pinched my arm. "Now if you could only find the balls to tell him how you actually feel about him."

I rubbed the sore spot that she'd left. "I can't. I don't want to lose him by asking for more than he's willing to give. You didn't see his face that day with all his friends. He was so freaked out."

" *Argh !*" Carrie threw her legs over the edge of the bed. "You are so exhausting, boy." She got up and walked out of the room.

Before I could follow, my phone dinged with another message. Clay sent a photo. It was the one he took of us this afternoon. He had his carefree grin

on. His brown eyes dazzling in the sunlight, his hair all floppy and cute. My arms hung loosely around his shoulders. I had such a dopey look on my face. I thought about kissing his cheek right before he took it. I clicked on the image to enlarge it, zooming in until I could only see Clay. I wished I could set this photo as my lock screen, but that was out of the question.

I would do just about anything to be with that boy. But I would not do anything to risk losing him. That was the potential price of the truth, confessing my feelings. A price I was not willing to pay.

Chapter 23 - I Wish You Would

- *Emmett* -

There was a brief knock on the front door right before Clay rushed in and smiled at me. He stayed true to his promise. He didn't disappear. In fact, he came around almost every day after school for the next month to hang out. Even when I was doing my homework. He'd sit on the floor next to my desk doing his—inevitably finishing first, since he wasn't bogged down with an AP course load. Then he'd take a nap on my bed while I finished and we'd watch movies or go out.

Sunday was the only day I rarely saw much of him. He spent the mornings with his other friends for what he called "Bro Time." The evenings, he spent with his family. Occasionally, the Millers would invite me around for Sunday dinner, which was always nice. Clay's parents had taken to treating me like one of their children, asking about my schooling and extracurriculars. They seemed quite impressed to learn that I was the senior class treasurer. They even inquired sometimes about my dating life, just as they did with Clay and Rachel. Mrs. Miller in particular seemed invested in finding me a boyfriend. She even tried to set me up with the gay bike messenger who delivered to the law office where she worked as a paralegal. He was cute, but he and I had nothing in common. We barely spoke on our one and only date. I only went out with him because I was terrible at saying no to authority figures. Also, I wanted her to like me, so she'd continue inviting me to dinner.

When Mrs. Miller brought up that the nephew of a friend had recently come out as bisexual two weeks later, Clay shut her down, shouting, "Jesus Christ, Mom! He doesn't want you to get him dates. He's just too polite to tell you."

Clay immediately apologized for the outburst, but Mr. Miller took away all three of his video game systems for a week for his rudeness.

"Hey!" Clay said, kicking off his flip-flops at the door. "I saw your mom wasn't home, so I figured I'd just let myself in."

He walked over to the couch where I had stretched out on the chaise section, reading *The Great Gatsby* for the umpteenth time. Clay sat down right next to me—despite the four feet of space on the couch. I was very glad that the incident in my bed hadn't put him off being affectionate toward me. He propped his legs up beside mine, crossing his ankles. My leg hair prickled when his leg brushed against mine. He leaned his head on my shoulder and stared at the pages.

"Did you need something, Clay?" I asked as his toes pressed against my foot, making me lose my place as I thought about the possibility of Clay rubbing that foot up my leg. Or maybe Clay throwing his leg across me, rolling on top of me and pressing his lips against mine.

"Is that for homework?" Clay asked, pulling me back from the fantasy before I got too excited.

"It's for enjoyment."

"Okay, nerd." Clay lifted his head slightly. His eyes couldn't have been more than an inch or two from mine. "Will you go to a party with me, Em?"

"Why?" I asked, distracted by how close he was. Close enough, I could count the freckles on his cheeks if I had the time. I examined his face carefully and inhaled deeply, enjoying that sweet, icy scent of his cologne. I could even smell a hint of sweat beneath it.

Clay also looked me over. "Jackson is begging me to go."

My heartbeat sped up as I thought about how close his lips were to mine. And the fact that we were basically breathing each other's breath. "So, go with Jackson."

"Carrie is going, too. I don't want to be a third wheel." His voice was pleading now.

"I'm sure your other friends will be there."

"They won't. The person throwing it goes to your school, I guess. Everybody there is going to be super preppy. And I don't think I can handle that much khaki and argyle alone."

I cracked up at his pitiful expression. "That's just our uniform. They don't dress like that all the time."

"I beg to differ. I've seen some of those kids in town. They look pretty uptight to me. Definitely members of the Sweater Set."

"You make it sound like they're in a gang."

Clay cracked a smile, amused by the simile. "I bet they could cut you with their starched collars, before beating you over the head with the sticks up their butts."

I shook my head, snickering. "You're so dumb."

And adorable, I added in my mind.

"Please, Ems." He clasped his hands together. His bottom lip jutted out woefully as he rubbed his cheek against my shoulder like a cat seeking attention. "I'll do absolutely anything you want if you do this for me."

Those were dangerous words. Not because I would ever act on them in that way, but for the thoughts they brought up that I kept pushing aside. One day—a day I suspected was fast-approaching—I feared I'd no longer be able to bottle them up anymore.

"Fine." I threw in a groan to show my disdain so Clay would know the sacrifice I was making.

"You are a god." Clay grabbed the side of my head and pressed his lips against my cheek. He pulled back with a blank expression on his face.

That sent a torturous pang through my chest. As much as I relished Clay's friendship, I'd found it difficult to lock those feelings away. I had hoped my

crush would fade over time, but it blossomed into something much stronger and deeper the more I got to know him.

To avoid having this tempting offer hanging between us, I closed my book and held it out to Clay. "Read this."

Clay took the book and looked at the cover. He flipped it over to scan the back. "I've already read this, in ninth grade."

"You said you didn't remember any of your assigned reading books."

Clay nodded. "Okay, yeah. That's true."

"It's one of my favorite books, and it's what I want in return."

Clay puckered his lips, examining the cover again. "Can't I just watch the movie?"

I flashed an annoyed grimace, raising a brow. "You said you'd do anything."

"Fuck! I said that, didn't I?" Clay sighed heavily, letting his head drop onto my shoulder. "I really thought you'd just want to take me to, like, one of those tragic German movies again. And I could just sleep through it."

"This is what I want." I tapped the book. "And I want you to really try with it."

"The things I do for you. I swear to God," Clay mumbled. He lifted his head and shook it. "Okay. I'll try."

"Thank you."

Clay flipped through the pages. "Don't you want to finish it first?"

"I've read it like fifty times. And I have another copy."

Clay stopped at a random page, then stared at me. He pointed out the penciled in words. "' *Definitely gay behavior*,'" he recited. "With three exclamation points?"

My cheeks burned. "I can give you the other copy. It doesn't have all my notes."

Clay snapped the book shut and clutched it against his chest. "I'd rather read this one and see what you thought. It's more fun that way."

"If you say so."

He opened the book again to flip through the pages. "I don't remember there being any gay characters in this. Wasn't it written in, like, the 1920s? I didn't even think they could put gay people in stuff back then."

"You'd be surprised. There are queer characters in literature throughout history. But in the case of *Gatsby*, it's debatable. I won't spoil it, but some people say a certain character is gay, some people say that the character isn't. You can clearly see which side of the argument I fell on."

"Now I'm super curious to read it." Clay slapped my thigh and jumped up. "Well, I gotta go."

"You just got here."

He raised the book. "I have homework now. Plus, I have to pick Rachel up from practice." Clay flashed a brilliant grin that melted my heart. "You could ride along if you want."

"I'd love to, but I ordered food." I picked up my phone from the arm of the sofa to check the time. "I've still got twenty minutes till it gets here."

"I can't wait that long. Rachel might strangle me if I'm late to pick her up again." He backed toward the door, keeping his eyes trained on me. "But I'll pick you up at eight. Okay?"

"I'm counting the minutes." I said it sarcastically, but I kind of genuinely meant it. I always eagerly anticipated my time with Clay. Only he could have me looking forward to a party with my classmates.

Chapter 24 - Addicted to Love

- *Clay* -

I sat in my car in front of Emmett's house, waiting for him to come out. I drummed my hands on the steering wheel, my heart pounding harder than the bass in the Kendrick Lamar song pumping through the speakers. The last two months since meeting Emmett had been the most exciting of my life. They'd also been the most confusing two months of my life.

Before Emmett, I never had these feelings for guys. Though, if I were being honest, I never had these feelings for girls either. I pursued relationships with girls because it was expected that I should have a girlfriend. My friends always made a big deal of it whenever I was single, constantly pushing me to go after some girl I had no interest in. Brandon still hadn't dropped his pursuit to get me laid. Just yesterday, he said, "Just find a person you think is hot. It doesn't matter who they are." In their defense, it was partially my fault for not telling them how I felt, rather than just shrugging them off. They just wanted me to be happy.

If only I could tell my friends that I was single because the person I desperately wanted didn't want me back.

Besides, there was something special about Emmett. Sure, I wanted to be with him, but more than that, I wanted to know him. And if I had to squash my attraction down until it gave me an ulcer, I would. I *needed* Emmett in my life. I craved Emmett. My veins ached for their next fix. My heart throbbed every time I passed his street. Not even his house. Just the sight of the fucking street was enough to raise my blood pressure.

Thankfully, Emmett didn't get weirded out earlier when I kissed his cheek. I got caught up in the moment with Emmett being so close and so cute. A bit of my true feelings bubbled up before I could stamp out the idea.

And I got off easy with Emmett's request being reading a book. I would read a thousand books if he wanted. It was honestly a good thing that he wasn't aware of the power he held over me. All he needed was to ask and I would do anything for him.

Emmett rushed out the front door. The sight of him made my heart flutter.

I allowed myself to the count of five to ogle him, concealed in the dark oasis of my car.

One ...

His black hair swept into a perfect mess.

Two ...

His sharp-cut jawline sporting the tiniest bit of stubble. I wanted to rub my cheek against it to feel the scratchy satisfaction.

Three ...

His lips that sang a siren's song luring me to the dangerous idea of letting my own lips meet them.

Four ...

The pale pink button-down shirt that clung to his taut frame, allowing me a wondrous glimpse of what lay beneath; all that tan skin my fingers itched to explore.

Five ...

The no-man's-land— *the no-Clay-land* —beneath his belt that led to all kinds of scary, lovely, thrilling ideas.

Emmett opened the door, spreading light across the car. I pushed my legs together to hide the tightness in the front of my jeans and brought my hands down to the bottom of the steering wheel as extra cover. His sweet scent

filled my nose, making my mouth water. I wanted to bury my face in the nape of his neck, to inhale that scent, getting high off him.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," Emmett said.

When the dome light extinguished, I unplugged the aux cable from my phone, cutting off Kendrick mid-verse, and handed it to Emmett. That had become a habit. I did everything in my power to make Emmett comfortable and content around me, hoping it would make him want to spend even more time with me.

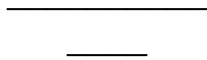
Emmett shook his head as he plugged in his phone and searched for a song. "How do you always get me to do exactly what you want?"

I had to laugh at that. If we were doing what I wanted, we'd be hidden away in some secret place where no one would find us, wearing a lot less clothing, letting our mouths and hands explore forbidden territory.

With Taylor Swift's "Don't Blame Me" roaring from the speakers, I pulled away from the curb, letting myself bask in the glory of that notion. Imagining how I would worship every inch of Emmett until he belted out a holy chorus. As I listened to Taylor's words, I realized this song was weirdly apropos to my situation. I wondered if it was kismet or if Emmett was secretly aware of my desire.

I shook my head.

Keep dreaming, dumbass.



The address Jackson sent was on the other side of town, where all the houses stood behind castle walls with automatic gates to keep out the riffraff. Where statues and fountains took the place of lawn gnomes and birdbaths. Not a single lawn had so much as a stray weed.

The driveway of the behemoth of a house was jammed with cars, bumper to bumper. I grimaced at the thought of having to park in that chaos. "Do you mind if we park down the street and walk? I don't want to get stuck in that if this thing is lame and we want to leave."

"Fine by me," Emmett said.

I did a quick U-turn, driving back down the street to the small park we passed on the way in. I pulled into an empty spot and cut the engine. It seemed we weren't the only ones with this thought. A dozen other cars sat in the lot and not a single person was in the park.

Another car pulled into the space beside us. A gang of rowdy boys jumped out, chasing each other down the street toward the party.

Emmett sighed. "I can't believe I'm actually choosing to spend time with these people."

"I thought you liked your school."

"My school is great. It's the people I could live without."

My eyes lingered on his face, drifting down to his lips. Emmett turned to me with furrowed brows. "What? Do I have a zit or something?" He pulled the sun visor down and opened the mirror to check. The tiny light shined on his beautiful face, making his green eyes glow.

"I just got distracted thinking about what you said. About not liking the people. I get that."

Emmett slapped the visor closed and nodded. "After this year, I'm so out of here. On the first flight to New York after graduation."

The thought of Emmett leaving town— *leaving me* —sent an icy prickle across my skin. "Why New York?"

"Because nobody cares what you are there. Gay, straight, pan, bi, ace. You just get to live anonymously in the middle of a million people with better things to do than think about you and your sex life."

I didn't know what "ace" meant, but I agreed with the sentiment. It would be nice to live in a place like that. To not worry if the people around me would accept what I felt for Emmett. I could just grab Emmett in the middle of Times Square and kiss him like the couple in that famous photo from World War II. Although, unlike the woman in that photo, Emmett would consent to kissing me back.

Honestly, all I needed was that last part. I didn't care where we existed so long as he was there, loving me, wanting me.

"You're doing it again," Emmett said.

I blinked, realizing my eyes were fixed on his lips again. "Sorry. Just... yeah. That sounds great."

"What about you?" Emmett asked.

"What about me?"

"Don't you have plans for after graduation?"

I shook my head. "I never really think that far ahead."

"You don't have any idea where you might go? You have to want to go somewhere out of state, right? I mean, who in their right mind would ever choose to stay here?"

"When I was a kid, I used to think I wanted to be a doctor. Ya know, so I could find a cure for what my dad had, so no one ever has to go through what he did."

"That's admirable. And sweet."

"I'm not smart enough for that, though."

Emmett gripped my shoulder, sending shivers up my spine. "I think you could do it, if you really apply yourself."

It meant a lot that Emmett believed in me. My parents had offered similar sentiments in the past, but coming from Emmett, it hit differently.

"Maybe you could go to NYU or Columbia," Emmett said excitedly. "We could hang out all the time. Maybe even get an apartment together."

That sounded like a dream. I could imagine myself strolling down the streets of Manhattan with Emmett at my side. Though, in my perfect dreamworld, Emmett would hold my hand or have an arm wrapped around me.

As we hiked up to the house, I turned to Emmett and asked, "What is ace?"

"Asexual. It basically means you aren't sexually attracted to anyone. But there's like a whole spectrum, and I'm not an expert, so maybe look it up if you're really curious."

I wondered if that was what I was. I had never been all that interested in sex, or sought it out. I did it with Summer, and one other girl before that. But it always felt wrong. Not in the moral, you're-going-to-Hell sense. It just felt awkward. I didn't see it as arousing or appealing. Not like my friends, who acted horny all the time. Even porn never did much for me—although given recent realizations, perhaps I was watching the wrong kind.

Because, despite never having had an interest, there was Emmett. My attraction to him was most definitely sexual. And intellectual. And emotional. Emmett was everything. He gave me the feelings I read about in the great romance novels they assigned for English class; the feelings described in love songs that I always dismissed as schmaltzy or over-exaggerated. He made me see the art in what I once thought of as bullshit.

Gay. Bi. Ace. I didn't know what label fit me. As terrifying as it was to admit—even to myself—I knew for sure I couldn't claim straight anymore. I'd known it for a while. I'm not sure I ever really claimed it, though. It was just foisted on me by my friends, our school, this town. That was the default here. That was normal to them.

But if my feelings for Emmett were any indication of what I could have had all this time, I didn't want their definition of normal. Their normal had left me feeling broken and miserable my entire life, being with girls I had no feelings for just because they expected it of me. Because they brainwashed me into believing their way was the right way. The only way.

Well, fuck them. And fuck *normal* .

Chapter 25 - Should've Said No

- *Emmett* -

Inside the massive house—which was really more a mansion—Clay circled around in wide-eyed wonder at the opulent entryway with its antique bronze chandelier and the curving staircase that wrapped around half the room. With everyone so packed in, the air conditioning could barely keep the temperature tolerable, combating the throngs of people inside and the suffocating heat outside. The windows (along with my eardrums) rattled from the throbbing bass in the basic electro-pop dance song that auto-tuned the voices so badly the singer was unrecognizable. If I didn't already know, I never would've guessed her identity. Or even that she was a woman with the way they pitched her voice too low or too high half the time. I loved a good pop song, but I'd had my fill of DJ remixes. If I never heard another over-synthesized, manufactured hit with inane lyrics, I'd be content.

My breath hitched when I looked up at the huge banner hanging from the second floor landing. Pink glitter spelled out, "Happy 18th Birthday, Whitley!" I did not know this was her house, or that it was her birthday.

Clay rushed over and clung to my arm. "You can't just wander off and leave me like that. This is your turf, remember?"

"Hardly."

Clay hung his arm around my neck, giving me a good whiff of his cologne. He smelled so good I wanted to lick his neck. Such a lovely neck. It wasn't too thick nor too gangly. His Adam's apple was prominent, but not huge like Alfie's. Above that was his strong chin, which had a small indentation in the center, not pronounced enough to call it a cleft. The perfect sprinkle of freckles across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. And his rosy lips. The sharp peaks of his upper lip, and the soft swoop of his thicker bottom lip that I just wanted to suck on.

You can't think like that , I scolded myself, pinching my leg as a bit of negative reinforcement.

A few people cheered as Whitley swept down the staircase, throwing harsh sneers at anyone who blocked her graceful descent. She wore an eye-catching off-the-shoulder red dress. The hem fell to her calf with a slit up the side all the way to her thigh, which was as rail thin as the rest of her. Her dark brown hair was pulled up into an elaborate twist in the back. She looked more like she belonged at the Golden Globes than a birthday party. No one else was even close to being as dressed up as she was, except for the four girls trailing behind her, all of them wearing dark colors so they didn't steal focus.

At the bottom of the stairs, Whitley paused, noticing me. She was no more than three feet away. Her ruby lips parted, her blue eyes rolling back, annoyed. She turned her head to the side, keeping her eyes locked on me. "I really should've hired a bouncer to keep out the undesirables and the *freaks* ." She made sure her voice was loud enough that the entire room could hear.

I guess she was still sore at me for getting her brother arrested for a hate crime. Even after three years. Not that he served a single day for it. But he got expelled, which was better than nothing.

Her friends laughed, scrutinizing me as they passed, heading through the living room and out the back doors.

Clay pulled me closer and said, "I know it's terrible, but I kinda want to go key her car."

I smiled at him, his face once again so close. All I'd have to do is lift my chin a bit to kiss him. But I restrained myself. "She has that effect on people."

Clay and I headed into the cavernous living room that had three separate sitting areas and a fireplace on both sides of the room for some godforsaken rich people reason.

"Emmie!" Carrie squealed from across the crowded living room, garnering a few stares. Her curls were out in full force tonight—not that she had much of a choice with the humidity. Her cleavage also made a guest appearance thanks to a plunging halter top that looked like liquid gold every time she moved.

Carrie pushed her way toward us, unaware of the wave of irritated stares she received behind her back. Jackson trailed in her wake, rushing through before the gap closed around him.

Clay released me as Carrie approached. She threw her arms around my neck, even though we just saw each other a few hours ago.

"I'm so glad you're here, Emmie!" She took a sip of the red concoction from the clear plastic cup in her hand. The whiff I caught nearly singed my nose hairs. I didn't know how she drank that without choking. I also wondered how many of those she'd had because her words were a bit slurred. "I hate all these people." She didn't bother lowering her voice at all. If she wasn't so beautiful, she'd probably be a pariah for the way she treated our classmates.

It just made me smile and love her all the more. She had a very no-fucks-given attitude about our snobby peers.

Jackson greeted Clay with their stupid straight boy handshake. They slid their palms together all the way to their fingertips, using each other's fingers to snap, finishing up with an obligatory fist bump. Clay tried to teach it to me once. I just couldn't get the snapping down.

"Did you know this is Whitley's house?" I asked Carrie.

She shook her head, rubbing my arm. "Not till I saw that stupid banner. I tried to call, but you didn't answer." She knew exactly why I wouldn't want to be in this house.

I didn't answer because we were almost here when she called. "Dear Society" by Madison Beer had just come up on my playlist, and I didn't

want to interrupt the song, because Clay had never heard of her and he said he really liked the song.

Carrie leaned into my side, and lowered her voice—though it was probably at normal speaking volume—to say, "You'll never believe who's here."

I looked around at the sea of faces, searching for someone who seemed out of place. I noticed Makenzie on the couch making out with our friend Dan, his fingers twisted up in her red hair. Makenzie dating Clay's friend Brandon for those ten days really gave Dan the push he needed to put himself out there with her. Finally. They'd harbored mutual crushes for years, and frankly their constant weepy-eyed, longing stares at each other when the other wasn't looking really pissed me off sometimes. Unlike me, they could pursue the person they wanted without fear of reprisal. The worst that could happen for them was to be told no.

But they couldn't be who she meant. Makenzie and Dan might not act like our stuck up, self-involved peers, but they definitely belonged in this world. Makenzie lived five minutes down the road in a house almost as opulent as this one. Dan's house wasn't too far away, either.

Coming up empty, I asked, "Who?"

Carrie glanced at Clay and Jackson. She grabbed my neck and pulled me down to whisper in my ear: "Alfie."

"My Alfie?" I asked, gripping her shoulders for support. Alfie wasn't mine anymore, I reminded myself, but Carrie would understand my meaning. "What the hell is he doing here?"

She shrugged her shoulders to indicate her cluelessness. "He's out by the pool with that bish Trista."

I pulled back to glare at her. "You really need to stop hating on her. It was two years ago. And it's not like she meant to do it. She was falling down the stairs and you were the only thing she could grab onto."

"Thanks to her, the entire school knows what my ass looks like." She gulped down the rest of her drink and dropped the cup on the floor.

"You're the one who wore a thong to school." I didn't really want to deal with her personal drama right now. Especially not something from so long ago. I had my own past trauma to stew over.

She leaned her shoulders back, glaring at me with a look of betrayal. "Are you victim-blaming me?"

"Sorry."

Carrie crossed her arms in a huff. "I woulda been fine if she hadn't ripped my skirt off. I had to walk bare-assed to the office." That wasn't entirely true. She took my cardigan and tied it around her waist for cover. "They made me wear lost and found gym shorts for the rest of the day. They had a stain on them."

I remembered it well. Carrie burned those shorts on their barbecue the moment she got home. She called it a cleansing ritual.

Jackson slipped his arms around Carrie from behind. "What's this I hear about asses?"

Carrie glared at me, telling me I could not relay that story to Jackson with a single look.

"We were looking around to check out which guy has the best," I said, covering for her.

"Oh." Jackson's expression fell. He nuzzled his face into Carrie's neck, making her giggle. "I better be at the top of that list."

"I offered you as a prospect for first place," Carrie said. "But Emmie thinks Clay's is better. More rounder."

Clay's eyes snapped to me, his lips parting. A blotchy blush crept over his cheeks.

My face flushed. I shook my head. "I did not say that."

Jackson grimaced. "That's only because he does so many fucking squats."

"Can we please stop talking about my ass?" Clay mumbled, staring at the polished hardwood floor. His entire face had gone red. Even his ears turned pink.

"I need a drink," I said, looking around for the nearest source of alcohol.

"Me, too," Clay said.

"Kitchen's thataway." Carrie pointed to a doorway at the back of the room.

"Thanks."

I rushed off through the crowd, being more careful than Carrie as I weaved through the mass of bodies.

In the kitchen, I nearly jumped out of my skin when someone clapped me on the back. It was only Clay. "So, you think I have the best ass here, huh?" He kept his voice low so no one would overhear, but he was wearing a very charming half-smile.

"I swear she made that up. I'm sure she was just trying to get a rise out of Jackson. She likes to poke beehives and get things stirred up. Especially when she's tipsy."

Clay nodded, pressing his lips together with an unreadable expression. Then the corner of his lips quirked up, and he snapped his fingers. "Damn. And here I was thinking I'd get a pretty sash and a tiara."

I forced a laugh, too worried about the implications to actually be amused by the joke. "So, we're good?"

Clay grabbed my shoulders and shook me. "Of course."

He narrowed his eyes, looking me over. "Are you okay, Em? You don't seem like yourself."

"Yeah. I'm good." I lied. I didn't want to burden him with all my baggage.

A beautiful girl with copper skin and silky black hair passed by. Clay returned the smile that she offered.

I leaned closer to him to be heard above the music and said, "If you want to go talk to her, you can." I didn't want to hold Clay hostage. I suspected I would not be the best company right now. "I can find someone else to hang out with. There must be someone at this party who'd be interested in me."

Clay rubbed my shoulder. "I'm sure there is." The way Clay said that actually had me believing it.

"Statistically, at least one guy on the lacrosse team has to be in the closet, right?"

I don't know why I made that joke. It wasn't even close to true. Well, the statistical part probably was. But I would never go near one of those meathead fuckboys.

Clay pressed his lips tightly, raising his brows as he nodded.

"Go." I gestured to the girl, sizing Clay up with a flirty gaze over the rim of her cup.

Clay looked hesitant. Probably worried about leaving me alone. "You really want me to?"

No .

But I said, "Definitely. Go! Take a shot."

Clay gave me a once-over before walking away, throwing a look back over his shoulder before turning to greet the girl. She immediately laughed at something he said, laying a hand on his chest in the same spot my head had laid two nights ago while we watched *My Neighbor Totoro* with his fingers raking through my hair. I felt an intense sense of betrayal that nearly brought me to tears, but it was my own stupid fault for sending him to her. I should've said no when he gave me the chance.

Clay pointed at her cup, probably asking what she was drinking. It was the same red drink that Carrie had. She held it out to him, her eyes locked onto his. Her lips formed the words, "Want some?" I could imagine the sultry tone she used to deliver that line.

I envied her ability to flirt with a guy she liked so openly, publicly. The one time I tried being bold with a guy at school ended with disastrous consequences. Namely, a black eye, a busted lip, and a cracked rib, courtesy of Whitley's brother, Patrick. Although that was a setup from the moment Patrick approached me, pretending to like me.

It suddenly occurred to me that happened not far from here. If Patrick was telling the truth about his house being backed up to the ninth hole of the golf course, then I could probably walk into the backyard and see the spot.

My chest tightened thinking about that.

Clay took the girl's cup and took a sip as easily as he did when I had a drink. He nodded and smiled, handing it back. The girl ticced her head to the side and took Clay's hand as they walked toward me. Her gaze stayed straight ahead, but Clay's eyes met mine. His face was indecipherable as he stared until he passed by.

I never should have come to this fucking party.

I gnashed my teeth together. A searing fire burned deep in my chest. I felt the stinging threat of oncoming tears. I couldn't be sure if it was because I was very close to the place I got beat up, or because of everything with Clay. It could be either. Or both. Whatever the cause, I needed to get out of this room.

I couldn't go the way Clay went, so I slipped through the door to the living room where I'd entered. I ran into Makenzie and Dan, both of them giggling and cute and acting like a couple, and I just wanted to scream in their faces, because I was miserable, and it felt like everyone else should be too.

Obviously, I didn't scream at two of my best friends. But when they tried to speak to me, I just shook my head and backed away, returning to the

kitchen.

I still needed to get away. To hide. To not have forty witnesses to my emotional breakdown. I was already the gay kid. I didn't need to be labeled the psychotically emotional kid as well. I considered going out the back door, but the thought of running into Whitley out there made me want to vomit.

Looking around, I spotted a dark hallway tucked behind the wall with the refrigerator built into it. I made a beeline for it, ready to elbow my way to freedom if need be.

Safely tucked away in the dark hall, I let out a shuddering breath. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." I knocked my head against the wall to punctuate each word.

"Emmett?"

The deep voice startled me. I blinked a few times and rubbed the back of my hand across my eyes to clear the teardrops forming at the corners. I'd know that voice anywhere. "Alfie," I said, even before I turned to see my ex-boyfriend standing in the door at the end of the hall, next to the mudroom and what must be their garage door. Before he turned out the light, I noticed the room behind him had a sink and vanity mirror. A bathroom.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, eyeing the room as a potential safe space for my meltdown. If only I could get past Alfie.

"I dated Whitley a while back." Of course he did. Wasn't that just fan-fucking-tastic? "It was a couple months after me and you—"

"Broke up?" I didn't have the emotional capacity to deal with his closet case euphemisms right now.

Alfie glanced past me, probably checking for eavesdroppers, and nodded. "Yeah. She and I stayed friends." There was more he didn't say. He and I were not friends. Before that day at the ATV track, he hadn't even spoken to me in nearly a year.

Alfie leaned against the wall opposite me, tucking his arms behind his back. Despite all the noise just on the other side of the wall, this felt incredibly intimate. He chewed on his lip as his eyes scanned me. He used to get that look before sex.

"What?" I asked, feeling self-conscious under his steady gaze.

"What are *you* doing here, Emmett? You hate parties." His eyes glanced toward the party. "And these people."

I wondered why I wasn't running for the bathroom. Escape was so close. I had a clear shot. But I couldn't get my legs to work.

I shrugged. "My friend begged me to come."

"Carrie." The word came out as a whisper, his eyes dipping to the floor.

"Clay."

Alfie's shoulders tensed—he may have even stopped breathing for a second—as his eyes met mine. "Clay is here."

"He went off with some girl."

I looked at the end of the hall when something crashed in the kitchen. There was a round of applause. Someone shouted, "Nice going, dipshit."

Alfie crossed the hall. He leaned his shoulder on the wall beside me. His chest was so close to my shoulder, I could feel his body heat.

My nerves spiked. As much as I resented him for the way he ended things, he still got to me.

"Good." Alfie brushed his large hand across my chest. "I thought you and him might be a thing. I know he's straight, but I also know how irresistible you are."

It stung to have Clay's heterosexuality thrown in my face like that. Just another reminder that I could never have him the way I wanted.

I shook my head. "We're just friends."

Alfie brought his hand up to cup my face, turning my head toward him, tilting my chin up. Without another word, Alfie kissed me. And I let him.

Alfie grabbed my hand and pulled me into the bathroom, flipping on the light as he locked the door behind us. It was small. Just a powder room with a toilet and sink. But we didn't need much room for what Alfie intended.

Even as he unbuttoned my jeans, pushing his hand into the waistband of my underwear to grab hold of me, the alarm bells were ringing, screeching out, *This is a terrible, stupid, destructive mistake* .

Ignoring my better judgement, I smashed my lips against Alfie's, tasting the sour tang of beer on his tongue. If I couldn't have Clay, I could at least pretend. I closed my eyes, imagining it was Clay's hands unbuttoning my shirt. It was Clay's lips trailing down my neck. It was Clay that I got down on my knees for.

Chapter 26 - Fight or Flight

- *Clay* -

I spent the better part of twenty minutes listening to a girl named Saffron prattle about the complexities of her former relationship after her boyfriend walked into the party with her cousin. I spent most of that time being hurt that Emmett insisted I go after this girl, passing me off on a stranger so he could seek someone else to be with. Some other lips to kiss.

I had a brief ray of hope with Carrie's comments, only to have Emmett douse it almost immediately, making sure our status quo stayed in check.

Although there was something else up that he wasn't telling me. I could see it in his eyes when he was staring at the birthday banner, then again, right before I went to talk to Saffron.

I only followed her, hoping to see a spark of jealousy from Emmett. Even taking a drink from this random girl's cup. Something I would never do, even with my closest friends. Except Emmett, of course. I kept my lips sealed tightly to the rim of the cup so none of it went in my mouth, but it still made me want to gag. Thankfully, she was too faded to notice.

Emmett stayed stone-faced the whole time. His indifference destroyed me.

When Saffron got distracted, I pretended to need the bathroom, slipping away. I hurried back to the kitchen, hoping Emmett hadn't found another guy yet. Maybe if I gave our secret signal, he would forget his pursuit and leave with me. We could go grab burgers, or maybe go back to Emmett's house and lay in his bed to watch movies. I would even be willing to watch one of Emmett's artsy indie films where everyone always seemed to be miserable. I had far too much suffering of my own to seek that out as entertainment. No matter how "powerful" Emmett claimed them to be.

The thought of us in Emmett's bed made my heart sing. I was so comfortable there. I could be myself— *mostly* . Emmett never asked me to

be anything else. He just let me *be* .

If I acted the way I did with Emmett around any of my other friends, they'd probably call me a girl. A sissy. *Gay* . Maybe even something worse. They wouldn't be cool with me wanting to cuddle during movies, or throwing my legs over them. Stroking their hair the way I did Emmett's. Even though it might mean much more to me, Emmett just saw it as friendship. He accepted it as part of the package of Clay.

That meant everything.

With no sign of Emmett in the kitchen, I did a quick lap around the house in search of him. I found a threesome, a fight, and a group hotboxing in the sauna (because this house had its own fucking sauna). No Emmett, though.

I returned to the kitchen, hoping he would eventually return to find me. Maybe he was looking for me right now, and we kept missing each other. One walking out of a room just as the other walked in. I imagined canned laughter playing every time this missed connection occurred, getting more hysterical as we both grew more frustrated.

When Emmett rounded a corner from a hallway I hadn't noticed, I broke into a smile and rushed over. "There you are!"

"Hey." Emmett looked me over. "What happened to that girl?"

"It wasn't happening." I didn't want to talk about her.

Emmett's eyes darted around the room. He kept picking at his shirt like it didn't fit properly. Probably because the buttons were misaligned. I would have noticed that before and mentioned it so he could fix it. This was a recent development. He'd taken his shirt off.

My stomach churned. That familiar crushing weight pressed on my chest, stifling my breath. Everything went hazy as the world flipped upside down before righting itself, throwing me off-balance. I inhaled through my nose in a steady rhythm. I once heard that could stop a person from crying. I didn't know if it was true, but it was worth a shot to avoid making a scene.

Someone else appeared behind Emmett, almost running into him. A pair of dark brown hands grabbed Emmett's shoulders. A deep, much-too-familiar voice apologized for the near collision. It took a moment for me to tear my eyes away from Emmett, raising them to the newcomer's face.

I fell back a step, as if someone had pushed me. "Duke?"

"Clay!" Duke dropped his hands off Emmett. "Hey, dude. I thought you were hooking up with some hot girl."

"I thought so, too," Emmett said with a hangdog expression.

I couldn't be in this situation anymore. I couldn't stand there with Emmett and Duke, knowing what they probably just did. Knowing that Emmett would rather be with Duke—whom he said he hated—than be with me.

"I feel sick." I blurted, though not intentionally. I immediately covered with a lie: "I think it's food poisoning or something. I have to go."

"That's cool," Emmett said, his brows knitted together in concern. He laid a hand on my shoulder. "We can go. I'll even drive if you need."

"Stay!" I said, a bit too forcefully. I cleared my throat and clutched my hand over my stomach, hoping it came off as a side-effect of being sick, and not the bitter jealousy I actually felt.

"I can take you home," Duke told Emmett.

I gritted my teeth, gripping my hand into a fist at my side so tight that it hurt. "Yeah. Do that."

I had never hated anyone in my entire life, but I suspected this anger bubbling, hot and heavy, in my chest every time I looked at Duke and heard his stupid, deep voice was a pretty good indicator that I hated him.

Why did he get what I wanted? Why did he get Emmett's affection? Why did he get to touch Emmett, kiss him? He didn't deserve Emmett.

I wasn't sure if I deserved Emmett either, but at least I had never broken his heart.

"You gonna be okay, buddy?" Duke asked.

"I have to go." I spun around, ignoring Emmett calling after me. I fled the party, the world going blurry around the edges. I sprinted back down the street to my car.

Tears erupted as soon as I sat down and closed the door. I slammed a hand against the steering wheel. Once. Twice. Three times.

My anger morphed into despair. I folded my arms on the wheel, laying my head on them as sobs wracked through my body and tears poured down my face.

Why didn't Emmett want me?

Chapter 27 - Treacherous

- *Emmett* -

Clay broke his promise to never disappear on me again. Did he even remember making it? I was getting worried about him. He looked pale and bleak the night of Whitley's party. I called and texted, but he never responded. A few times when I kept the message app open, the dancing dots appeared, but no message ever came from them.

Alfie, on the other hand, had not stopped texting since the party. The messages ranged from sweet boyfriend-y things—such as, *I miss you* , or, *You're so cute* —to sexy soliloquies that belonged in an erotic novel. I didn't recall him being so amorous the last time we dated. When he drove me home after the party, he grabbed my arm as I reached for the door. He pulled me into a fierce kiss before releasing me, telling me to call if I wanted a repeat of what happened in the bathroom.

I had not called him yet. My mind was too preoccupied with thoughts of Clay, and worrying about his wellbeing, to make room for Alfie.

My friend Dan cleared his throat in an exaggerated manner to get my attention. He sat across the room in my desk chair, his laptop balanced on his bony knees. An inordinate amount of stickers, chaotically overlapping each other, covered the laptop. As always, he looked unkempt, wearing clothes two sizes too large (currently, his school uniform) to conceal his skeletal frame.

"I thought I was supposed to be the flaky one in this partnership," Dan said. We were partnering on a project for sociology. I couldn't even recall what we were meant to be doing. "What's going on, Emmett?"

"Nothing," I lied. I was doing a lot of that lately. It was getting to the point I wondered if it was worth it anymore.

That's when a perfectly logical explanation occurred to me. It wasn't false, per se, but it also wasn't the truth. "You remember all that shit with Patrick Montgomery in ninth grade?"

Dan closed his laptop and turned to lay it on the desk next to mine. "Of course." He flicked his head to get his shaggy dark hair out of his face.

"It's just been kind of on my mind. Going to their house the other night brought it all back in a big way."

"Shit, dude." Dan dug his heels into the carpet to drag the chair over next to my bed where I laid. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. "I will be. Don't worry."

"Look, if you don't want to do this project. I can do it myself. I mean, I can't guarantee anything higher than a C, but I'll totally do it."

I shook my head. "I just need a couple minutes to clear my head. Then, we can get to it. Because, no offense, I like my GPA where it is."

Dan raised his hands in the air. "Fair, dude. Totally get it."

When I glanced out the window, I spotted Jackson leaving Carrie's house. "Hold that thought, actually." I jumped up and slipped my feet into my flip-flops. "I'll be right back."

"Take your time," Dan called out as I sprinted down our stairs—nearly tripping down them.

I raced across the street as fast as possible in flip-flops (a terrible sartorial choice for someone in a hurry) and asked about Clay.

"He's been sick since that party," Jackson said. "He wasn't even in school yesterday or today."

I nodded, accepting this. Having a legitimate reason for this sudden lack of Clay made me feel a little better. He probably caught something from that girl he drank after.

"Summer said he's been asleep both times she went over there."

"Summer. As in his ex-girlfriend?" That sent a pang of jealousy through my chest. Was Clay getting back together with Summer? He seemed pretty adamant that he didn't have feelings for her.

"Yeah," Jackson said. "They're in most of the same classes, so she collects his assignments from the teachers and takes it to him. She's always been real sweet like that."

The jealousy receded slightly with this new information. I couldn't be mad at someone for looking out for Clay.

A question popped into my mind. But I wasn't certain if I really wanted the answer. "Have you talked to him?"

"Just some texts."

Clay could text Jackson, but not me. That stung.

This radio silence irked me. Clay and I had gotten into the habit of texting every night before bed. Usually stupid jokes to make each other laugh. We once had an entire conversation using only gifs. I'd read over that exchange since, and I couldn't for the life of me recall what the hell we were talking about. It was just a bunch of random junk: all the intense stares from *Twilight*, the most iconic lines from *Star Wars*, baby goats, Little Mix being chaotic, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Taylor Swift's cat Olivia Benson, back-and-forth Moira Rose quotes, a man chasing a pig, and the *Riverdale* "I'm a weirdo" speech. I once asked Clay, and he didn't remember the context either.

I missed talking to him.

I cleared my throat to make sure my voice didn't betray my feelings. "When you talk to him, will you ask him to call me?"

Jackson raised one shoulder in a noncommittal gesture. I wondered if I'd have to beg. Then he said, "Sure."

Jackson opened his door and climbed into his car, pausing with the door half-open. He looked back at me. "Is something happening between you and Duke?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"Carrie's concerned about you."

Anger bubbled up, temporarily distracting from my jealousy and melancholy. "Carrie never should have blabbed to you about us."

"Don't blame her," Jackson said quickly. I appreciated him being defensive of Carrie, even if I wanted to strangle her for telling Jackson my business. "I made it seem like I knew more than I did. She just said you had a situation with a guy, it ended badly, and it seemed like you were gonna fall back into it. I brought up Duke and her expression confirmed it."

"Why do you care?" I asked.

"Because I love Carrie. And Carrie loves you. Probably more than she loves me." He snickered. "In fact, definitely more."

"I love her, too."

"Listen, Emmett, I've known Duke a really long time, and he's one of my best friends, but I wouldn't want to date him."

"You're straight. I get it." I was trying for jokey, but my frustration seeped into my voice, and it sounded more bitchy.

Jackson seemed annoyed by the comment. "No. It's not about that. Duke is a great friend. But he's a shitty boyfriend. I've seen the way he treats girls. Like they're disposable. 'There's always another around the corner.' That's something he's actually said to me."

"So?"

"So, I can't imagine he's a better boyfriend just because you're a guy."

I crossed my arms, feeling attacked. "Are you telling me not to see him anymore?"

"I'm telling you to be careful, dude. Don't wreck yourself over him, just to be another person he throws away. Also, it would kill Carrie to watch you suffer through that."

I nodded. "Thanks for the advice." The words came out sharper than I intended. I really appreciated the warning. But I understood exactly who Alfie was when I followed him into that bathroom. I didn't plan on getting sucked back into that he-loves-me-he-loves-me-not drama. But that didn't mean I couldn't use Alfie as a surrogate to express my feelings for Clay.

Chapter 28 - The Cut That Always Bleeds

- *Clay* -

When I got home from the party, my throat was raw, my eyes red from crying. My mom accused me of being high until I spoke and my voice came out as a harsh croak. I told her how awful I felt—I did not explain the specifics of why.

Sure enough, she jumped to conclusions and assumed I was sick. She sent me to bed and brought in a bowl of chicken noodle soup that she spooned into my mouth like I was an invalid. I didn't mind it, though. I didn't have the strength to lift my arms. I didn't really want the soup, but I enjoyed the comfort as she dragged her fingers through my hair, humming.

I thought this bone weary feeling would fade by morning. I was just sad. Not actually sick, after all.

I was wrong.

For most of Saturday, I just felt tired and sad. I had a terrible headache and stuffy nose from crying all night. I didn't get out of bed all day. The thought of eating made my stomach churn. My phone dinged, and pinged, and rang, and whistled with a myriad of notifications, but I couldn't bring myself to reach out to the nightstand to pick it up. Just the thought of it was exhausting.

When I awoke Sunday morning, I felt worse than before. My skin was on fire, drenched in sweat. My mother informed me I had a fever, even before she broke out the baby thermometer to shove in my ear, confirming her diagnosis. She made me get up so she could change the sweat-dampened sheets. I tried to protest. "I don't care if they're wet." I didn't want to leave my cozy cocoon of blankets. She insisted to the point of ripping the

blankets away, leaving me exposed to the icy air in just my boxers and t-shirt.

Mom helped me to the shower, but I insisted on doing that part alone. She grimaced, putting her hands on her hips, offended. "I changed your diapers, little boy."

"Well, I've grown since then," I grumbled.

She threw up her hands and left me to undress by myself. Every little movement hurt. My body was so weak. My limbs weighed a hundred pounds each.

Could a broken heart could cause this kind of sickness? I figured the word heartsick existed for a reason.

For the first time in my life, I actually craved a cold shower. The cold water was not cold enough, though. It felt warm against my blazing skin. I imagined each droplet sizzling into steam as it hit my body.

After I got out and dressed in the long-sleeved shirt and pajama pants my mom had readied, I opened the door to discover her sitting on the edge of the freshly made bed. She leapt up and ran to put an arm around me.

This went on for days. I didn't even know how many. Everything just blurred together into a mixture of sipping soup broth, having terrible nightmares about Emmett abandoning me, gulping down a disgusting bittersweet syrup that made me gag, and my mother's voice softly singing to me. In my moments of clarity, I responded to messages from Jackson. I also had many calls and texts from Emmett, only I didn't know what to say to him, so they went unanswered.

Finally, my fever broke, but Mom wouldn't let me out of bed just yet. She said I still needed to rest, so the fever didn't return.

Sometime in the afternoon of whatever day it was, I awoke from a nap and heard my door crack open with a tiny squeak.

I rolled over to check it. "Mom?"

She stuck her head in the door. "You're awake? There's someone here to see you, if you feel up to it."

Emmett's face popped into my mind. Then Duke's appeared, taking away the momentary glee I felt at the prospect of seeing Emmett. Honestly, I didn't even know if he'd want to see me again. I broke my promise that I wouldn't vanish like I did before. At least this time, I had the excuse of being deliriously ill to fall back on.

My mom disappeared. When the door opened wider, my chest constricted. The beautiful girl who stepped inside, her arms crossed over her chest with a blue binder clutched in them, was the last person I expected to see.

"Summer? What are you doing here?"

She'd changed her hair since the last time I saw her. Gone were her long curls. Replaced by a straight, blunt bob, cut to her chin. It suited the oval shape of her face. She looked very cute in a pair of high-waisted jeans and a sleeveless purple crop top, leaving a two-inch strip of her dark skin exposed. I had the sudden thought that a guy who was into girls would probably find the look sexy.

Summer closed the door, crossing over to sit at the foot of my bed. It was so familiar. She'd done that a hundred times. However, it didn't feel right for her to be here. She hated me.

She tossed the binder into my lap. I opened it to find my schoolwork. I lifted my eyes up to her. "You're the one who's been bringing this over? I thought it was Jackson." Jackson was the only person I'd spoken to outside the house for days. I tried texting Emmett back, but the words never came out right. I typed so many things, deleting each line as soon as I finished it. They were all selfish. I confessed my feelings a dozen times, only to tap them away again and again.

Emmett didn't want me like that. It wasn't fair to lay these feelings at his feet when I knew he did not share them.

"You look like shit," Summer said before she cracked a smile.

I pushed my long sleeves up to my elbows, sighing. "That's about how I feel." I rubbed a hand over my face. "I don't even know what day it is."

"It's Wednesday."

Wednesday. That meant it had been five days since I last saw or spoke to Emmett.

Summer was still staring at me, scanning my face. "And to be honest, you actually mostly just look depressed."

I took a shuddering breath as tears welled in my eyes.

"Oh my God!" Summer scooted closer and laid a hand on my arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

I shook my head. "It's not you."

"Then what is it?" Summer asked. She tilted her head, softening her eyes in that Summer-way of hers to show me she was listening. I had her sole focus.

Something about the caring look in her stormy ocean eyes got me to speak the words I'd been too afraid to say aloud to anyone: "I think I'm in love with my friend Emmett. Who's a guy."

Saying it out loud, I felt a weight lifted off my chest, just a fraction. I was so sick of carrying this burden alone.

If my confession surprised Summer, she should teach a master class in acting because she didn't show it. She reached out and brushed her hand along my arm. "Does he know?" Her voice was so tender and calm.

That was not what I expected her first question to be. I thought she might ask how long I had known I liked guys—or, specifically, *guy*, since Emmett was the only one so far.

"Nobody knows."

Summer turned her head to the side, squinting her eyes at the signed Kobe Bryant jersey hanging on the wall by the door. "I don't think I know an Emmett. Do I?"

"He goes to Heron Prep."

"Fancy. How did you meet?"

"You remember that big fight we had the day before you broke up with me?"

Summer raised an incredulous brow and lifted her index finger in front of her. "You told me you didn't have romantic feelings for me. That you just wanted to be friends. I think *you* are the one who broke us up."

She had a point. I had taken her walking out on me as her ending it. But all the stuff I said beforehand definitely was the beginnings of a breakup speech.

"I really meant that I wanted us to be friends." I took hold of her hand. I was glad she didn't pull away. "I love you, Summer. Just not the way I was supposed to, as your boyfriend."

Summer gripped her fingers around my hand, actually holding it. "It's okay. I got over it. I'm dating someone new."

"Who?" I furrowed my brow. No one told me about this. Usually gossip about an ex got back to you immediately. *TMZ* couldn't hold a candle to the Huntington High gossip mill.

"Shawn Turner."

"Shawn Turner," I repeated, scrunching my nose. "He's not your type at all."

"My type didn't work out so well for me if you'll recall." Her eyes went wide accusatorially as they scanned me. She had a point. I immediately

apologized. She tucked her hair behind her ear with a hint of a smile. "He's really sweet, and I don't know if it'll last, but I like him."

"I'm happy for you."

Summer patted my leg. "So, back to this boy. You were saying... the night before *you* broke up with *me* —"

"That's when we met. Remember? We were supposed to go bowling with Jackson and his girlfriend."

"Right! The girl who did those awesome hand-drawn designs on her tennis shoes."

I had no memory of said shoes, but I knew Carrie was artsy, so I just nodded. "Emmett is her best friend. He was there for a date, but the dude got back with his ex and flaked."

"That sucks."

"Yeah, and I was a dick to him because I was upset about our fight."

"Sounds like you." She chuckled.

I joined in for a moment. "I kinda deserve that."

"You do. But continue."

I leaned back against the headboard. I'd thought about that night so much it shined in my memory with diamond sharp clarity. "Emmett was so sweet to me, even though I kept bitching about everything, raging on him for the tiniest mistakes—we were on the same team against Jackson and Carrie. I called him a fuckwit once." I smiled, recalling his absolute disdain for me. "I think he wanted to punch me."

Summer crossed her legs and propped her head on her fist. "I don't blame him."

"We talked about what you said about me being distant. He helped me realize it was because I wasn't invested in us the way you were. He convinced me I shouldn't be selfish. That I should let you go if I felt that way. So you could be happy."

"I already like him."

I nodded. "I didn't know it then, but I did too. I couldn't stop thinking about him. And I had this warm, gooey feeling in my gut. It's like nausea, but I kinda liked it."

"That's always the first sign."

"We'll, I didn't know that. I've never had this before."

She gave me a look like I was an adorable puppy, but I wished she'd stop because I was getting embarrassed.

I told her about the go-karts. How his smile made my heart hurt. In a good way. How much I longed to see him every day.

Summer listened, riveted by the story, as I told her everything that I'd felt. How I fantasized about Emmett. How it felt to be with him. To be myself. To be happy. All the while, tears trickled down my cheeks, making little tapping sounds as they dropped onto the binder in my lap.

"You really are in love with him, aren't you?"

I nodded, staring into Summer's clear gray eyes as my breath hitched. "But why doesn't he love me back?"

"I don't know, baby." Summer moved to sit at my side, wrapping her arms around my neck. She smelled like cupcakes. "And I know it's not the same, it probably doesn't even compare, but I love you."

I wrapped my arms around her, letting out all my pain as she held me, whispering in my ear how great I was, how much she cared about me. "You deserve the world, Clayton Lennox-Miller. If that boy is too dumb to see it, it's his loss."

"I don't need the world. I just need him."

Summer squeezed me tighter, smoothing her hand over the back of my head. "I know, I know."

"I've done everything I can to make him happy, hoping that he might... that he might change his mind about me. Feel what I feel. But he—" I stopped myself before I mentioned Duke. I pulled back from the hug to wipe my hand under my runny nose, sniffing. I took a breath and rephrased the thought, "He hooked up with his ex-boyfriend. I wanted to crawl in a hole and die when I saw them together."

Summer stared into my eyes, gripping my chin in her hand. "Maybe you should focus on making yourself happy. If you believe Emmett is your way to do that, you have to tell him how you feel. You can't keep holding all this in. He won't know how much this is hurting you, if he doesn't know that you like him."

My breath shuddered again. My voice came out so low and hoarse when I said, "I'm afraid."

"Love is an immense thing. It can be scary." Summer leaned in to press her forehead against mine. "But I think it's worth the risk."

"Thank you."

"What good is having an ex-girlfriend if she can't hook you up with a hot guy?"

I laughed through my tears.

She pulled back with narrowed eyes. "He is hot, right?"

"So very."

Summer moved to the other side of the bed to sit beside me. We spent the next few hours talking about Emmett in so much detail that I worried she would get bored. But it was so nice finally saying it out loud. My family were the only people I ever spoke to about Emmett. They knew he was

important to me, but they didn't know the full capacity of my feelings for him.

After a while, I let Summer slip in a few stories about Shawn Turner. She really seemed happy with him. If this whole Emmett thing turned out horribly wrong, at least Summer came out the other end in a better place. Because even if Emmett wasn't a factor, I wasn't right for her. I could never return her affection the way she deserved.

Chapter 29 - Illicit Affairs

- Emmett -

I sat on the bench at the bus stop around the corner from Alfie's house, one hand gripping my handle bar to keep my bike upright, waiting for the all-clear text. His family was going out for the afternoon. "So, we'll have the whole house to ourselves," he said when he called earlier to tell me to come over. Now, I was just waiting here for them to leave.

This wasn't the first time I'd sat on this bench, my leg bouncing as I listened hyper-vigilantly for my phone to ding. I did this so many times when we were dating. And just like back then, I had this pit in my stomach. I felt sleazy, like I was a mistress waiting for my man's wife to leave so I could slink in where I didn't belong, stealing moments before he returned to his real life, in which I could never take part.

I used to push this feeling down and ignore it because I loved him and I wanted to be with him no matter how. But, sitting here, I wondered why I was suffering through this again. Just for a few moments, where I could pretend he was someone else. Someone I actually wanted to be with. It was so very fucked.

Then my phone dinged, and I was on my feet.

ALFIE: *They're gone. Get that sexy ass over here right now.*

I threw my leg over my bike and rode to his house. After stashing the bike in the bushes out front to hide the evidence of my existence, I snuck around the house, hopping the chain-link fence. His window was open, waiting. I had barely climbed through when Alfie grabbed me around the waist and whisked me to the bed, tugging at my clothes. I was having major déjà vu from last year. Most of our relationship happened in this room. He still had the same gray plaid bedspread and gray sheets. The same poster for *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* hung above his bed. A photo of his perfect

family all dressed up for Easter, standing in front of his grandpa's picturesque church, sat on his nightstand. His father's taciturn face stared at me disapprovingly as Alfie nibbled on my earlobe, grinding his pelvis into mine.

"Take off your shirt," Alfie commanded.

I complied without question or comment. Our relationship had never involved much talking.

"Roll over," he said.

Apparently, he wanted to get right to it today.

When I flipped over onto my stomach, he yanked my shorts down and poured the frigid lube on and started without warning. It had been over a year since I last had actual sex, so it was painful to start. Not that he noticed. But I soon relaxed, biting back moans as my mind wandered to Clay.

Clay had a picture on his Instagram from a couple months before we met of him on a large fancy boat, deep-sea fishing in the Gulf with his friends, in which he had no shirt. I'd stared at that picture a lot. I even took a screenshot, so I didn't accidentally like it by mistake as I lusted over him like a creeper.

My fantasy got interrupted when Alfie pressed a hand between my shoulder blades, pushing me against the mattress, spouting a lot of self-congratulatory statements about how much I liked it. With my face squashed into the bed, I couldn't agree.

Before I knew it, Alfie came and left.

I stood up, pulling myself together. Alfie, still stark naked, leaned against the open widow, muscles rippling beneath his dark brown skin. He put a joint between his lips, striking a lighter to ignite the end. He took a drag, holding it in his throat before blowing the smoke out the window. He held it toward me, offering it up.

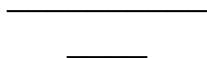
Funnily enough, that same gesture brought us together in the beginning. It was at one of Jackson's many parties. I was deathly bored, being ignored by Carrie, despite her assurances that she wouldn't abandon me. She was playing some drinking game with Jackson, beating him senseless. I went outside to get some air, because someone had puked in the kitchen sink, and Jackson poured bleach into it to wash it out, so the house smelled like a mixture of vomited up vodka and bleach. On the back porch, I found Alfie lighting a joint. He looked over when I walked out, giving me a once over. He offered me the joint, which was very strong. A few tokes had me in haze. We were the only ones outside, because it was freezing, with actual ice on the ground. He just leaned in and kissed me. He asked me if I wanted to go to his car and mess around. Obviously, I said yes.

I went over to the window, putting my lips around the joint as he held it. I copied him, breathing the smoke outside. I coughed a few times, which made him laugh. It had been a while since I smoked. I guess I was out of practice.

He hooked an arm around me, pulling me against his body. He took another hit, leaning down to put his lips against mine, shotgunning the smoke into my mouth.

We shared the joint for a few minutes before he licked his fingers and stubbed out the cherry, returning it to the tin box on the windowsill with the rest of his stash.

He grabbed the back of my neck, pressing his lips to mine, aggressively pushing his tongue into my mouth. He put an arm around me, holding me tight, and lifted me off the floor. I hooked my legs around his thighs as he carried me to the bed for round two. The joint took effect, a familiar serenity settling over me, making this attempt much more enjoyable than the first. It also helped that Alfie became a lot more affectionate with a buzz, taking his time to enjoy every moment. I should've known a year ago, when I learned that he couldn't touch me lovingly without mind-altering substances, that our relationship would not end well.



Alfie kissed my neck from behind as I sat on the edge of the bed, twisting my shirt around in my hands to find the front. His hand glided up my back, giving me shivers.

"Come on," Alfie said. "You don't have to go. They'll be gone for a couple more hours."

I pulled my shirt over my head to protect against his distracting touch. "I do, actually. I'm going to be late."

"For what?"

"I'm going thrifting to help Carrie find material for her new art project."

Alfie scoffed and fell back against his bed. "Who cares?"

I rolled my eyes, suppressing the ire blooming in my chest. "She's my best friend, Alfie. Stop being a dick about her."

"Her art sucks. I don't know why you indulge her. You could save her a lot of heartbreak by telling her the truth."

"That's a matter of opinion. One that I don't share." I crawled across the bed and leaned in to kiss him. He wrapped his arm around my back, pulling me down on top of him. His free hand reached for my crotch.

I jerked back. "Stop. I can't."

"Really? 'Cause it feels like you *can* ." Alfie grinned.

It was tempting. Alfie was hot. And sex with him was great, which was how I was falling back into this same pattern as before. Even if it wasn't his face I saw when I closed my eyes; it wasn't his voice I heard in my ear.

"I promised her," I said. More to myself than to Alfie. "I don't break my promises."

"Whatever." Alfie pushed me off. He threw his legs over the side of the bed, slipping his underwear on as he stood up with a frustrated grunt. "You

always do this to me."

"Do what?"

"Prioritize her over me. Not just her. You put *everything* before me."

"What are you talking about?" I devoted myself to him when we were dating, staying at his beck-and-call for the moments when he wanted me. Carrie and I had our biggest fight ever when I showed up half an hour late to her sixteenth birthday party because Alfie called me to come over after two days of not hearing from him.

"That's why I broke up with you last time," he said.

My eyes went wide. I grabbed a pillow and chucked it at him, striking his back. "You didn't break up with me. You just stopped calling and showing up."

"Yeah, well, you should have tried harder. You could have showed up for me. *For once*. You know where I live." He waved his hands around at his bedroom.

"I *did* try. I called and texted you so many times. And I *couldn't* just show up for you. You told me you were scared to tell anyone about us. That your dad would go nuts if he knew. I barely ate for two weeks, terrified something happened to you, asshole. Then I found you making out with some random girl at one of Jackson's parties, perfectly fine."

Carrie dragged me to that party kicking and screaming, determined to get me over him. She said it would be fun. She was wrong. I cried for two days after that party.

Alfie crossed his arms. "I never said anything like that."

"You did. Right after our first time having sex, you laughed and said your dad would murder us if he caught me in your bed."

"That was a joke," Alfie said with a shrug.

"Ha, ha, ha. A homophobe murdering queer boys for having sex. *That's hilarious !*"

He rolled his eyes, treating me like I was being a drama queen. As if that kind of thing didn't actually happen in the world. "I was being hyperbolic."

"I'm surprised you even know that word."

"Are you calling me dumb?"

My head slowly shook from side to side. More out of disbelief than an actual answer. "Not as dumb as me," I mumbled under my breath.

I blew out a breath and headed for the door, forgetting for a moment that I couldn't go that way. Alfie grabbed my elbow to stop me. I expected him to point to the window, to remind me of my place. "Are you seriously walking out on me?"

"I have to go."

Alfie released his hold on my arm and stalked toward the door. "Whatever." He opened the door, waving his hand to the hall—as if he'd actually let me leave through the front door. His lip started quivering and his eyes became glassy. "I know you'd rather spend time with her than me. You love her more, and I don't even blame you. I wouldn't want to spend time with me, either. You're right. I am an asshole. I'm totally fucked up."

I hated when he did this. He denigrated himself, so I would defend him and fluff up his already over-inflated ego.

Rather than argue about it and get stuck here for twenty minutes, I went over and placated him. I laid a hand on his cheek and stretched up to press a soft kiss to his lips. "You're not. But I have to go." I made it sound as if I didn't have a choice. And I knew exactly what to say for him to accept it. "You know how Carrie can be. If I don't show, she'll get mad. She might tell my mom about us. You know she doesn't like you."

Alfie nodded, his face twisted up with bitterness and distress. "Another person I can add to the list."

Then he smiled, pushing the door shut. He grabbed my face between his hands and kissed me fiercely. "I love you so much."

I wasn't sure that was true. I didn't know if I truly understood what genuine love felt like, but I knew this wasn't it. If he loved me, he wouldn't try manipulating me into ignoring my friend. Or force me into manipulating him just to get away from him. If he loved me, I wouldn't hate myself right now.

Chapter 30 - Don't Think Twice, It's All Right

- *Clay* -

After school Thursday, I ditched my friends who tried to coax me into an evening of video games, pizza, and beer at Brandon's to celebrate my Lazarus-esque return to the land of the living. I made the excuse that I had way too much make-up work from three days of school missed. Although, thanks to Summer, I only had one assignment to finish to be caught up with my classes. I knew Jackson knew she'd done this, but he said nothing, which I loved him for. This was one of the many reasons he was my best friend. He knew sometimes I just needed time for myself. He was my only friend who knew about my anxiety disorder and my panic attacks. Not even Emmett knew about that.

My heart pounded as I stood on Emmett's porch. My shaky finger hovering an inch from the doorbell. It seemed odd to be nervous. I had been to Emmett's house so many times, never thinking twice about it.

Sure, I got excited at the thought of seeing him. Being in his room. In his bed. But these nerves plaguing me were new. Maybe it was because I hadn't seen him in almost six days. Maybe it was because of what happened at the party.

I wondered how I would feel if Emmett told me he was dating Duke.

Devastated . That's how I'd feel.

No. I knew why I felt like this. It was everything Summer said. Maybe she was right. This half-life I had been living in order to keep Emmett was tearing me apart. It literally made me physically ill, knowing that Emmett had hooked up with someone else—which Emmett had every right to do.

Hearing the clicking of the front door being opened, I jumped back a step. Mrs. Noble's eyes went wide upon seeing me. "Clay! I'm so glad you're feeling better."

"You and me both."

"You know Emmett's been upset all week that he couldn't talk to you."

"He has?" I asked, biting my lip to hide my joy. Emmett's distress shouldn't make me this happy.

"Mm-hmm." She nodded. "But he's not here."

My heart sank. As nervous as I was, I was still dying to see him. "Oh. Okay."

When I turned to go, Mrs. Noble called my name. I looked over my shoulder. "He's at Carrie's." She pointed to the white house across the street. "They won't mind if you want to go over and see him."

My lips stretched into a grin too wide to conceal. "Thanks."

The heart-pounding excitement returned as I walked down the sidewalk, listening to her crocs scuffing against the pavement; the click as she opened her car door. My muscles ached to run, to get me to Emmett as fast as my feet could carry me. But I wouldn't let myself be so eager. Not while Mrs. Noble was outside.

I heard the car engine start. I paused at the street while she backed the car out of the driveway. She waved. I returned the gesture before she sped down the street, much faster than the posted 15 miles-per-hour speed limit.

When Mrs. Noble's car made the turn at the end of the road, I rushed to Carrie's front door and jabbed the doorbell without hesitation.

The door opened on a woman who looked almost identical to Carrie, except about twenty years older with faint crow's feet at her eyes and laugh lines bordering her lips. She didn't have Carrie's tight curls, just a slight wave in her russet-brown hair.

"Can I help you?"

"Mrs. Noble said Emmett is here."

She leaned on the door, tilting her head. "And who are you?"

"My name's Clay. Emmett is my friend."

"Ah!" She smiled, looking me over as she stepped aside to let me in.
"They're in the pool." She pointed to an archway at the end of the hall, using her hands like a flight attendant to give me directions. "Just hang a left through the kitchen and out the sliding door."

I rubbed my sweaty palms on the front of my shorts. "Thanks."

I walked through the sliding glass door onto the back patio just as Emmett ran down the diving board and jumped off the end, doing a backflip in midair to dive into the water feet first.

When he blasted to the surface, Carrie shouted, "And he's done it again, Bob! What a show? Just listen to that crowd. They love him. The judges have gotta give him full marks for that showing." She cupped her hands around her mouth, making the sounds of a roaring crowd. She chanted his name over and over again.

I smiled. I had never seen them interacting like this. The unvarnished truth of Emmett and Carrie. When others were around, they communicated in a secret language of glances, lip twitches, and the occasional indecipherable quips that only they understood.

I let out a "Woo!"

Both their heads jerked to the side to stare at the intruder in their little world.

"Impressive," I said, applauding. "I'd probably break my neck if I tried that."

After the shock wore off, Emmett grinned from ear to ear. "Clay!" He swam to the edge, his face radiating pure joy. Seeing him again gave me the same feeling. He pushed himself out of the pool and rushed over, water cascading off of him to darken the pavement in his wake.

I allowed myself one brief glance at Emmett's body—glistening and tan and shirtless—before fixing my gaze on his face. "Hi."

Emmett crushed me in a bearhug. "I'm so glad you're okay. I've been really worried about you."

I wrapped my arms around him, gripping my fingers into his slick skin. I buried my face in his neck. Anyone that saw us might think I was kissing it. If I puckered my lips right now, I could be.

"I'm much better now." And I meant that in more ways than one. I wasn't sick, but being near Emmett also lightened my mood. It renewed the air in my lungs where I felt suffocated without him. I could finally properly breathe again.

"You broke your promise," Emmett whispered, so low I could barely hear him. "You said you wouldn't disappear on me again."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I'll forgive it this once because you were sick. But never again."

I gripped him tighter, reaching up to hold the back of his head. "Never again. I swear."

I didn't care that my clothes were getting wet, or that Carrie was watching us. I did care, however, that I was getting too excited by this much contact and the thought of my lips creating a trail across Emmett's skin.

I pushed Emmett away, stuffing my hands into my pockets. I hoped bunching the material at the front would cover the bulge in my shorts.

Emmett looked down. I worried he might have noticed, until he said, "Sorry. I soaked your clothes."

"It's just water," I said, unable to keep the smile off my face for too long.

"I really missed you."

I chewed on my bottom lip, trying not to show how happy those words made me. I only wished Emmett meant them the way they felt to me. "I missed you, too."

Emmett gave a genuine smile, even showing teeth, which was an even rarer event. He rubbed a hand over his wet hair, messing it up.

"Do you mind talking louder?" Carrie shouted, her arms folded on the edge of the pool. "It's a little hard to eavesdrop when you both speak so damn quietly."

We both laughed.

When Emmett walked back toward the pool, I followed. My eyes drifted down Emmett's back. He moved with such a smooth, graceful gait, like a dancer. And maybe my eyes kept going lower to stare at his butt and the way his swimsuit clung to him, molding to his body.

His waterlogged swim trunks hung low on his hips. The thin strip of paler skin visible at the waistline had me mesmerized. The tan line was especially prominent because Emmett's olive skin was a shade darker than usual, as if he'd been spending more time in the sun lately. It made sense. The last week had been exceptionally hot, according to the morning weather alerts I set to know if the heat was too unbearable for my daily jog. I suspected he and Carrie had taken refuge in the pool to combat the heatwave.

I sat on the end of a lounge chair and waved. "Hi, Carrie."

"Hi, Clay." There was a strange, knowing tone in her voice. I wondered the reason behind it. Did she know? Had she guessed? Maybe she saw my boner before it deflated. Or maybe it was the way I stared at Emmett's ass twenty seconds ago.

Carrie pushed off the pool wall, gliding backwards through the water while Emmett crouched down and hopped back in. He turned back to me. "Why don't you get in?"

"I don't have a swimsuit."

"Just take your clothes off."

"I'm not swimming naked." The thought of that terrified me. Not the being naked part; I'd gone skinny dipping a few times. It was the being naked in front of Emmett part that was troublesome. I couldn't hide if I got turned on again, and I just got it to go down.

"I meant you can swim in your underwear, doofus," Emmett said, laughing. "I do it all the time."

"It's really no big deal," Carrie added. "Besides, you can lay your clothes out and by the time we get out, they'll be dry. I mean, you'll have to go commando when you leave, but who among us hasn't?"

I raised my hand. "I've never done that."

"Just don't do it if you're gonna wear jeans on a hot day," Emmett said. "Because you will chafe."

"Or leather if you go clubbing," Carrie added, turning her eyes to Emmett. "Remember that heat rash you got when you wore those leather pants to Vibrant."

Emmett swept his arm through the water to throw a wave at Carrie. "Don't tell him that."

I ignored their bickering splash-war, contemplating jumping in. The water looked so inviting. Perspiration was already beading on my forehead and my shirt was clinging to my back, just from sitting in the sun for five minutes. If I stayed, I would get drenched in sweat soon, anyway.

"Fuck it." I stood up and kicked off my flip-flops, stripping down to my boxers. I did as Carrie suggested and laid my damp clothes out flat on the

lounge chair to let the sun dry them.

I walked over to the deep end and plugged my nose before taking a step off the edge. I sliced through the surface, my feet touching the bottom.

Springing up to refresh my lungs, I shook my head and swiped a hand across my face. I swam towards the shallows until my feet could reach the bottom. I looked to Carrie. "You'll have to tell Bob sorry for my lack of ingenuity."

"Huh?" Her forehead creased, then her eyes went wide with recognition. "Oh. That."

She and Emmett shared a look. They both snickered.

"That's just this stupid thing we've always done," Carrie said. "We're kind of obsessed with the swimming part of the Olympics. Especially the diving."

"That's cool," I said. "My sister and me always watch gymnastics and track. And snowboarding in the Winter Olympics. Rachel also loves the figure skating."

Emmett glanced at Carrie with a devious smirk. Then he met my eyes. "She's lying to you. What we're obsessed with is the hot guys."

Carrie sighed dreamily. "All those abs. And those tiny speedos."

"Don't forget those tight asses," Emmett said. He rolled his eyes back in his head and made a grunting sound in the back of his throat that did things to me. I was glad water created distortion.

I forced a laugh. "Right."

"Omigod, Emmie!" Carrie slapped the water. "Somebody in our Twitter group shared a news interview with this gorgeous blond Adonis who swims for UC Berkeley. Apparently, he's the next big thing in the butterfly stroke. It was so adorable. His boyfriend showed up at the pool while they were doing the interview. The guy actually told the interviewer to wait while he

went over to kiss his boyfriend and say hello. Then he brought the guy over and held hands with him for the rest of the interview."

"Aw ! I love that," Emmett said. "Send it to me."

"Already did. Check your DMs."

"They actually showed him kiss the guy on the news?" I asked, surprised.

Carrie nodded. "Not everywhere is still as repressed as our fair hamlet." She sounded resentful.

I understood her bitterness. Her best friend was gay. She wanted him to be happy without worrying about what someone might say or do to him. I pictured what Carrie described, but in my head, those guys were me and Emmett. Emmett stopping an interview, talking about some amazing heart-wrenching novel he'd written, just to kiss me.

"Are you okay?" Emmett asked. He was staring at me with a worried look.

I realized I had been staring at him the whole time. "What? Yeah. What do you mean?"

Emmett shook his head. "You just had this look. Like you were... I don't know... sad, maybe."

People kept saying that to me. First, Summer. Now, Emmett. Apparently, I had resting depressed face.

"I was just thinking about what Carrie said. And I was thinking about you."

Emmett looked confused. "Me? Why?"

"Because you have to deal with living here. Isn't it hard being here, being out?"

Emmett shrugged. "It's better than being here and being *in* . I was a nervous wreck before I came out. Always worried I might slip up and say something to reveal myself."

"What made you finally do it?"

"Honestly, I was in the car, on the way to school, with my mom and Carrie. And I just had this urge to tell them. I'd gone over how and when and what to say a million times, trying to find the perfect way, but nothing ever seemed right. In the end, I just looked at them that day, and I wanted them to know who I was. This was the only thing about me they didn't know. Carrie was talking about a crush of hers. Then I just blurted, 'I like boys.'" He chuckled, grinning widely. "It was a mess of a coming out."

"It was perfect." Carrie swam over and hooked an arm around Emmett's neck, pressing her cheek to his. "His mom pulled the car over when I attacked him from behind with hugs and kisses."

"They both said they loved me, and we all got out in a Walmart parking lot and hugged. And I cried. They cried. Then my mom took us to school."

"Did you know?" I asked Carrie. "Before he told you? Could you tell?"

Carrie shrugged, smoothing her hands over the surface of the water, barely sparing me a glance. "I never really gave it that much thought, to be honest. I was much more concerned with who I wanted to date than who he did. And he was never on my list."

Now that was shocking.

Before my brain could catch up, I blurted, "But he's hot."

Every muscle in my body seized up.

I did not just say that.

I did not just say that.

I cannot have just said that.

Oh my God! I just fucking said that.

They both stared at me.

I had to do damage control. Walk it back. Or make it less weird. Guys could acknowledge another guy's looks. Even straight guys knew the difference between an attractive man and an ugly one. They may not say it, but they knew it.

I started rambling, trying to get myself out of this: "I mean, like... you know... objectively and all. Emmett is... he's an attractive guy. For most people. Obviously, that could change from person to person depending on preference and cultural norms. But standards of beauty, y'know? Symmetrical features and all that."

What the hell was I even saying? Did any of that even make sense? I didn't remember half of what just came spewing out my mouth after I said it.

Emmett continued to stare with open-mouthed awe, completely speechless.

My heart pounded faster than that day on the 4-wheeler when I began this obsession with him.

Carrie regained her composure and said, "Yeah, you're right. He is. But he's like my brother. Even before I knew he was gay."

"Cool," I said, training my eyes on a tiny stick that floated in the water near me.

I considered fleeing, but that would make this a thousand times worse. Emmett would know. If he didn't already.

Chapter 31 - It's Time to Go

- *Emmett* -

Did Clay really just say that? Surely, I had water in my ears and misheard him. Right?

I couldn't believe it. Clay just called me hot. Not attractive, or handsome, as some might say if they were—as Clay put it—speaking objectively. Hot was a word used to describe someone you were attracted to. Not acknowledging some idea of beauty standards or whatever the hell Clay said. That's how I used it, anyway. Maybe he didn't mean it that way.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Carrie declared she was "voracious" and that "comestibles" were required "expeditiously." She was really getting into using that ACT vocabulary word-a-day calendar. Determined to get a better score than her last attempt.

Clay and I followed her out of the pool, wrapping towels around ourselves as we headed inside for a snack. Clay leaned close to me and whispered, "Does she always talk like Moira Rose?"

I laughed. Partially because that was hilarious, and I hadn't considered it before. And partly because if he could make jokes, then he wasn't freaking out.

I tried not to stare at Clay, relaxing on the barstool, with no shirt, one arm draped over the back. Clay had a perfect balance of lean and muscular. He had nicely defined pecs, and when he breathed in deep, I could see his abs, and of course, even though I'd denied it, he had an amazing ass, too. And don't even get me started on his back muscles. It still surprised me he hated sports. Playing them, that is. He watched them obsessively with his stepdad, which drove me crazy. It was almost impossible to get him out of the house when a big game was on.

Clay looked at me, and I instantly averted my gaze over to Carrie, who was wiping a glob of ranch dressing off her boob.

"Please tell me you're not going to lick that off your finger," I said.

"Well, now I'm not." She grabbed a paper towel to clean her hand, glaring at me.

"You're so gross."

Carrie scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Please! If he did that—" she ticced her head toward Clay "—you'd cream your pants."

"Carrie!" My voice went up three octaves.

Her eyes widened a fraction. She turned to Clay. "I didn't mean you, specifically. Just a guy. Any guy."

Clay blinked a few times. His eyes jumped between us, his mouth hanging open. "I'm sorry. What are you talking about? I zoned out."

"Nothing," Carrie and I said in chorus.

Carrie's phone beeped, distracting her.

"Seriously," Clay said. "What did I miss?"

"Just Carrie being gross," I said.

Something hit my forehead and dropped onto the counter. A carrot stick.

I glared at Carrie, who was typing with a huge smile on her face. "Sorry, boys, but I got a better offer." She looked at both of us in turn. "Jackson's taking me to dinner. So, you've got to scoot."

"Can we go to your house?" Clay asked me, his brows raised hopefully. "I need to talk to you about something."

"Sure."

"Let me grab my clothes." Clay jumped up and hurried out the back door.

I picked up the carrot stick that assaulted me and threw it at Carrie. It landed in her cleavage. She plucked it out and bit it in half aggressively.

"Seriously, Care? 'Cream your pants.' Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Sorry."

"That's the second time in a week you've made a crack like that to him about me. You know how much he means to me. I don't want to lose him because you can't keep your big fat mouth shut."

"You're torturing yourself, Emmie. You can't be in love with him and be his friend."

"Why not? Isn't being his friend better than being nothing?"

"It's not healthy." Carrie pointed her half eaten carrot at me, accusatorially.
"And I know he's the reason you started screwing that scumbag Alfie again. You either need to get over Clay, and truly be just his friend. Or let him go."

My head jerked back. "I'm sorry. Did you and your mom have a *Freaky Friday* situation? Because last time I checked, she was the only shrink in the house."

"Go ahead, deflect. That's real mature, Emmett."

"Fuck you!"

"Fuck *you* !"

"What's going on?" Clay asked, taking a tentative step inside. He was holding his clothes in his arms.

"Let's go," I snapped, though my ire belonged solely to Carrie.

Carrie threw her arms out to the side. "Fine by me."

Clay chased after me. "I'm not dressed."

"You can get dressed at my house."

The double doors of Dr. Herrera's office slid open. She stepped out, blocking the front door. She removed her glasses and surveyed my face, then Clay's. "What's with all the yelling?"

"Why don't you ask your colleague, Dr. Carrie? She's so wise. I'm sure she can explain it better than I ever could." I turned to face the kitchen and yelled, "With horrifically misused vocabulary words."

"That is erroneous and deleterious!" Carrie shouted from the kitchen.

I grabbed Clay by the hand and dragged him through the front door before Dr. Herrera could force me and Carrie to sit down couple's therapy style. It wouldn't be the first time.

Clay jogged beside me to keep up with my determined stride.

"Are you okay?" Clay asked. "I've never seen you like that."

"She pissed me off. And I don't want to talk about it."

Noticing that my mother's car was gone, I took a sharp left turn, still pulling Clay behind me. I went to the gate for our backyard. I left my keys and phone at home, since I was just across the street and my mother was there when I left. We had a spare key for the back door hidden under a rock at the base of the birdbath for times such as this.

I somehow got the key and got inside without ever releasing Clay's hand. And Clay never tried to take it away.

But I had to let go now. I had no reason to hold on. As much as I might want to. Staring at our joined hands for a moment longer than I should have, I finally opened my fingers and released Clay, feeling as though I had just severed one of my limbs.

Clay dropped his clothes into one of the dining chairs and immediately threw his arms around my neck. I startled at the sudden skin contact. We'd hugged before, but never like this, with nothing between us to act as a buffer, to keep thoughts of what else we could remove to rid us of all the barriers between us. Clothes. Friendship. Clay's ambiguous sexuality.

I raised my hands to place them on Clay's waist.

I assumed that was a step too far for Clay because he took a step back. But maybe I was wrong, because he didn't drop his arms as I expected. He leaned back just far enough so that his face was in front of mine. He gripped my biceps. His eyes searched for something. Maybe the answer to my fight with Carrie. Maybe something more.

Clay's eyes drifted down to my lips—which I had noticed was becoming a pattern. His lips parted. As his bewitching brown eyes met mine again, he whispered, "Emmett?"

"Yeah?"

"I need to tell you something."

"You can tell me anything."

Clay's eyes became bleary. He looked like he was about to cry. "I want you to know—"

Before he could finish his thought, my phone rang. It was sitting on the kitchen table where I left it after breakfast.

Clay looked over at the picture of Alfie, staring out at us with a cocky grin on his face.

Clay snatched his hands back, holding them up in front of his chest. If he clenched them into fists, he'd look like a boxer. He stepped out of my reach. That sensation of losing a limb returned. Only I had a suspicion I just lost much more than that.

Clay cleared his throat. "I have to get dressed."

"That's not what you were going to say." I took a small step forward, and he backed away. Clay shook his head as my incessant ringtone blared. I cursed myself for ever turning off silent mode. It was always a bad idea.

"Your boyfriend is calling," Clay said, backing away. I wasn't sure if I was imagining the harsh tone in his voice or if he was actually upset. "You should answer."

Clay gathered his clothes and turned around, dashing out of the room.

I grunted and grabbed the phone, sliding a finger across the screen to answer. "Hello."

"What's up, sexy?" Alfie asked.

"Nothing. Why?"

"I miss you."

"Translation: you're horny." I was not in the mood for this. I needed to find out what Clay was about to say.

"That, too."

"And I suppose you want me to drop everything to come service your needs?"

"Something like that. Everybody just left. They'll be gone for at least an hour. If you hurry, we could get in at least one good time."

I laughed, but not because I found it cute or funny. Mostly I found it annoying.

"Are you coming over or not?" Alfie sounded irritated. "If you're not, I might as well go ahead and take care of myself."

I rolled my eyes. "How can I pass up an offer like that?"

"Is that a yes?"

"It's a—" I paused when I heard the front door close. "Hold on."

I pulled the phone from my ear and ran to the living room.

Through the front window, I watched Clay getting in his car, fully dressed. Clay wiped the back of his hand across his cheek. He was crying.

Before I could even think to move, Clay quickly reversed his car out of the driveway.

"Emmett!" Alfie screamed loud enough to be heard even with the phone hanging down at my side.

I brought it to my lips to say, "Handle it yourself. I gotta go." I hung up and dropped the phone on the couch, staring through the window.

Had I been right about Clay? Was he going to confess some important secret? Could it possibly be what I hoped it was?

And the most important question: Had I just royally fucked it all up?

Chapter 32 - All You Need Is Love

- *Clay* -

Tears cascaded down my face, hot and salty and never-ending, as I drove home. I couldn't stay there. In that house. With Emmett talking to Duke. Saying all those things. I shouldn't have been eavesdropping. I knew that. It was wrong. But I froze in the middle of the living room the second I heard Emmett say, "Translation: you're horny."

That shattered something inside me. The word heartbroken had never made so much sense to me before. I imagined a glass sculpture of a heart (not an anatomical heart, but one of those cartoony commercialized Valentine ones) in the place where my actual heart should be. It fractured each time Emmett proved he didn't want me. Surely there were enough cracks now that it was irreparably damaged. Any day now, it would crumble to dust.

I didn't care that my boxers were still damp. I put on my clothes, ready to bolt.

Everything Emmett said pointed to the fact that he wanted Duke. I knew it was over before it ever got a chance to begin. I left as the tears started.

Emmett wanted Duke.

Alfie .

I had to stop fighting the fact that this would never happen. Emmett would never be mine.

If I were thinking clearly, I would've gone around the side of my house to my private entrance to avoid being seen. But I wasn't. So I didn't. Instead, I rushed in through the front door, past my mother in the kitchen. Flinging my bedroom door shut, I collapsed on the bed and buried my face in a pillow, hoping it would muffle the sounds of my sobbing. I couldn't believe

I almost confessed everything to him. My feelings, my fantasies, my hopes for what we could be.

There was a knock on the door.

I shouted, "I'm not hungry." My voice sounded so heavy and hoarse.

The door creaked as it opened. I raised my head and said, "I told you, I'm not hungry."

"It's a good thing it's not time to eat then," Mom quipped.

I didn't have the strength to muster a fake laugh at her stupid joke. "Can you please leave me alone?"

Mom sat beside me on the edge of the bed and laid a hand on my forehead. "Are you feeling sick again?"

"I'm fine. Just go." I sounded so desperate, even to my own ears.

"Clayton, what's wrong?"

"Ugh!" I hated my given name. I'd been Clay since I was five years old. No one called me Clayton. Except my mom when I was in trouble, pulling out the triple-barrel-name-drop for effect.

My mother must've thought this a serious occasion to drop a "Clayton" on me.

"You can tell me anything." She stroked her fingers through my hair. "I will love you no matter what."

My eyes went wide as all the air escaped my lungs. I stared at the red and black checks on my bedspread. "What?"

She couldn't know the truth. There was no way. I was just projecting my issues onto her motivations.

She moved on to rub circles on my back. "Just talk to me. I'm worried about you."

"I'm not sick anymore." I hoped that would be enough to get her to leave.

It wasn't.

"You should take one of your pills." Mom grabbed the orange pill bottle off the nightstand and fished out a single pill.

This wasn't a panic attack. I'd had enough of those to know the difference. But it could easily turn into one if I didn't calm down. So, I accepted the pill from her hand and dry swallowed it as a precaution.

"Maybe you should start seeing someone again," Mom said. "I know Dr. Gold retired, but we can find you someone else."

"I don't need another therapist," I insisted.

"If you can't tell me, I want you to tell someone. I'm worried that you're dealing with some very serious things, Clay." She gripped my shoulder. "Things that might be confusing you. Maybe even scaring you."

My heart stopped. Okay, that was overdramatic. It didn't stop. It just felt like it did to me. The gnawing sick pain in my stomach wasn't helping matters. "Why would you... Why would you say that?"

I sat up and scowled at her, feeling betrayed. There was only one way she could possibly know what I was going through. I'd only said my true feelings out loud once. "Were you eavesdropping on my conversation with Summer?"

I admit it was very hypocritical of me to be angry at someone else for doing that, when I did the exact same thing to Emmett not even fifteen minutes ago. But I did not care about right and wrong.

"Summer?" She furrowed her brow and shook her head, confused. "No."

"Then what are you talking about?"

Her face softened as she stared at me lovingly. "I wanted you to be the one to tell me, but I'm worried about you. I haven't seen you this upset since your dad died, honey. And I think I know what's going on."

"What did you want me to tell you? What do you think is going on?"

Part of me wanted her to say it and be right. To just have it out there and be done with it. No matter the fallout. It was so hard living like this. Another part wanted her to be wrong. Some off the wall theory that I could easily explain away, like her believing I was on drugs. I could disprove that with a blood test. Hell, they sold drug testing kits at the pharmacy. I could just pee in a cup right in my own bathroom and have the results in a matter of minutes.

"When you were sick, I don't know if you were delirious from the fever or just having vivid dreams, but you were talking in your sleep. You used to do that all the time when you were little." She brushed the hair off my forehead, pressing her hand briefly against my cheek. "You kept calling out a name. Over and over. You kept telling them how much you loved them and how much you wanted them to stay. It seemed like they were leaving you. You were so upset."

I could barely breathe. I couldn't even blink. My chest felt so tight and heavy. There was only one person I'd dreamed about for weeks. "What name?" The words came out barely above a whisper.

I knew the answer. And I could tell that she knew I knew it by her pitying stare. But I needed her to say it. It wouldn't be real until she said it.

"*Emmett*," she said. "In some form or another, you kept saying, 'I love you. Emmett. Please don't leave me.'" She reached up to wipe a fresh tear from beneath her eye with her index finger.

I swallowed past the pit in my throat and sniffled. My lip quivered. My eyes stung as fresh tears broke through, rolling down my cheeks. "I'm sorry."

Now she was full-on crying too. "Why, baby? Why are you sorry?"

"Because I shouldn't feel like this."

"Why not?"

"Because he's my friend. And... because he's... he's—"

"Because he's a boy?"

I nodded. "None of my friends will understand."

"Then they aren't real friends." Mom threw her arms around me, squeezing me so tight I couldn't catch my breath. But I was barely breathing right before, so I didn't fight it. It was nice, actually. I broke down sobbing as she rocked me back and forth, softly crooning "You're All I Need to Get By." My dad's favorite song.

After I'd calmed down, she pulled back to grip my shoulders, staring me in the eyes, ignoring the tears pouring down both our faces. "There is *nothing* wrong with the way you feel, sweetheart. If it's for a girl, or a boy, or someone somewhere in between."

"I don't know if I'm actually... *y'know* ." I couldn't muster the courage to say the word aloud just yet. Even though I was pretty certain that's what I was. If I were anything else, surely I would've been attracted to at least one girl in my life. But that didn't matter at the moment. My feelings for Emmett were the only relevant topic. "I just know that I love *him* ."

"That's okay. That's all you ever really need to know." She wiped her thumbs across my cheeks to clear away the tear trails. "I really like Emmett. He's a sweet boy. And you've been so much happier since you met him. Which makes me like him even more."

I took a deep, ragged breath. "I don't want to lose him, Mom."

"Why would you lose him? I hope you don't think we would ever keep you from seeing him." She laid a hand on my face. "We just want you to be happy, Clay."

That meant more to me than she would ever know.

"Thank you." I wiped my nose with the back of my hand, using the heel of my palms to clear away the tears still coming, though not as rapidly. "But it's not you. It's him. He doesn't feel the same way about me."

"How do you know? Have you asked?"

"No, but he—"

"No." She cut me off, jabbing a finger toward my face. "He might be sitting in his room crying his eyes out to his own mother about how he thinks you don't feel the same way about him."

"He also has a boyfriend."

"Oh." Mom's eyes widened. "That makes it a little more complicated. Although your dad—David, not Mike—had a girlfriend when I first met him."

"Mom, you were a home-wrecker?" I had to laugh. The moment of levity felt nice.

She made a scoffing sound that devolved into a chuckle. "I did no home-wrecking. Besides, we were only twenty. Very few people end up with the person they dated at twenty."

"What happened?"

"We just clicked right away. It's like—" she shook her head with a far off look in her eyes "—the Earth shifted and everything was brighter, more colorful."

"Wait. I thought you guys didn't get together until law school."

"We didn't. We were friends for almost two years because one of us was dating someone else the whole time. When he broke up with that girl he'd been with, I had started seeing another man. Our timing just never seemed to work out. I honestly thought we'd never happen."

"How'd you finally get together?"

"We were in a study group together—about six of us. And we all were cramming for a test at my apartment until almost three in the morning. Everyone finally gave up and went home, except David, who stayed to help me clean up. He was telling me about this girl he'd just started seeing. He didn't like that she called him Davey. And I just said, 'I can't do this anymore. It hurts too much to watch you love other people.'"

"What'd he say?"

"He said, 'Okay.'"

"'Okay?'"

She nodded. "He said, 'Okay,' then he put his coat on and headed for the door. I was so angry because I thought he was just going to leave me like that. I asked where he was going, and if that was it for us. Then he turned back to me with that beautiful smile of his." She tapped my chin. "That same smile as you. And he said, 'I have to leave right now before I kiss you, and someday we have to tell our kids I was a cheater when we got together.'"

I smiled. "He was confident."

"Too much for his own good sometimes." She had the faint trace of a smile. "The next day he broke up with the girl he'd been seeing and asked me out as we were handing in our tests in class. He said, 'it's about damn time our life together starts.' He proposed a month later and a year after that we were married, and you were on the way."

And nine years later he was gone.

"That doesn't really help me," I said. "Are you saying I should wait? Just stew in my misery for potentially years."

Mom shook her head and brushed the back of her hand across my cheek. "No. The exact opposite. I wish I hadn't waited so long to be honest with him. We lost so much time that we could've had together because I was too afraid to tell him the truth. And that's all you can do. Be honest. With

yourself and with Emmett. Then it's up to him to decide what happens next."

"But what if he still doesn't want me?"

"If you're anything like me when I lost my first love, you cry your eyes out, eat way too much ice cream, get a *really* bad haircut—" she cringed at a memory "—and then you meet the second love of your life. And the third. And the fourth. And the *tenth* . Because, baby, that whole *one* true love thing is a huge fucking crock of shit."

"Mom!" I laughed. "I'm surprised. The only time I've ever heard you cuss is when you get road rage."

"Sometimes the situation just calls for saying a fuck or two."

I cracked up again, feeling lighter already. "Who are you?"

"Don't act like you're so innocent, little boy." She gave me a gentle push. "'I love you' wasn't the only thing you were saying in that dream. You kept yelling at someone to 'fuck off.' I assume that wasn't also directed at Emmett."

I shook my head. "It was probably Duke."

"Duke? Why would you say that to him?"

"Duke is Emmett's boyfriend."

"*Really*?" The look of shock on her face was the look I expected from my confession that I was in love with another boy. I was actually glad that I didn't get it.

"You can't tell anyone," I demanded. "Not even Dad."

"I won't. I promise."

Just like when I told Summer my secret, I felt lighter now that I had one more person to help shoulder the load. Maybe she was right and the real

burden was hiding it. Telling Emmett could be the key to ending this torment, and the wrenching ache that I always carried in my gut.

"I love you, Clay." My mother leaned in and kissed my forehead. "Always remember that."

I gripped her hand and squeezed it. "I love you, too, Mom. Maybe now more than ever."

She patted my leg. "Now, go tell that boy how you feel. Don't waste anymore time wishing things were different. Do something to change them."

"Do you mind?" I motioned toward the door.

She smiled and nodded. "Sure."

After she'd gone, I took out my phone and called Emmett, who sounded frantic when he answered. "Are you okay? Why'd you leave like that?"

I picked at a loose thread on the hem of my shorts. "I wasn't feeling well. But I'm better now."

I heard him take a deep breath. "About today, before Alfie called—"

"Emmett," I said, interrupting him.

"Yeah?"

With my heart pounding in my ears, I asked, "Would you maybe wanna have dinner with me tomorrow night? And we can go to Jackson's party afterwards."

There was a long silence on the other end. So long that I pulled the phone away from my ear to make sure I hadn't been disconnected. The timer was still counting.

"Emmett?"

Finally, he said, "I'd love to."

"Okay. It's a date." I couldn't stop smiling. "Um, I'll let you go now. And I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah."

"Bye, Emmett."

"Bye," he said. I could hear the smile in his voice.

I hit the button to end the call and tossed the phone aside, falling back against the mattress, an excited giggle bubbling up from my throat. I did a little happy dance, which to an observer would probably look like I was a turtle stuck on its back trying to flip over. But I was alone, so I kept squirming around, unable to contain my excitement.

Although this was just the first step. I still had to tell him how I felt.

Chapter 33 - Epiphany

- *Emmett* -

I headed across the street and rang the doorbell. Normally, I would let myself in, but that felt wrong after my fight with Carrie. I heard stomping headed toward the door. It swung open and Carrie grimaced at me. She wore a ratty Wonder Woman t-shirt and tiny running shorts. Her golden brown curls hung wildly around her face. "What do you want?"

I pulled out the flag from behind my back and started waving it.

Carrie glared at the rainbow flag in my hand. "I already know you're gay, dumbass."

"I didn't have a white one. It was kinda short notice."

Carrie rolled her eyes, but I saw a hint of a smirk. She immediately pulled her lip between her teeth to snuff it out.

"Truce?" I asked.

Carrie crossed her arms, pouting. "You were mean to me."

"And you tried to out my feelings for Clay. Let's call it even?"

Her face softened. She tilted her head, making her curls fall across her face. She huffed and tucked them behind her ear. "Despite what I may have said, I didn't do it on purpose. I'd never hurt you like that, Emmie. You know I just shoot my mouth off sometimes without thinking."

I sighed. "I know, Care."

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, almost too low to hear.

"What was that?" I held a hand up to my ear. "Did you say something?"

"I'm sorry!" she blurted, much louder this time.

"I'm sorry, too."

Carrie teared up. She rushed forward and slammed against me, throwing her arms around me, pinning my arms to my sides. "I've missed you."

I reached out and patted her hips. "It's only been like two hours."

"The longest two hours of my life. God! I could break up with a million boys and never feel as wretched as I did today."

"I know what you mean."

"Now, get your ass in here and tell me what I've missed in Emmett-land."

"A lot actually." I walked past her and went to settle on the couch. "Starting with, I'm pretty sure Clay wanted to kiss me after we left, but before he ran from my house crying. And ending with him possibly asking me out on a date."

"What the fuck is your life?"

I barked out a sound of exasperation. "Your guess is as good as mine."

Carrie hopped onto the couch beside me, sitting cross-legged.

"I'm worried that him saying it's a date is just hyperbole."

She frowned. "I haven't made it to that word yet on my calendar."

"Exaggeration." I clarified.

"Right. I knew that."

I tapped her knee, noticing a fresh nick from shaving her legs. "Me and you say we're going on dates all the time."

"You think this is a friend-date? After you say he tried to kiss you?" Carrie sounded skeptical.

"He didn't *try* . He just looked like he wanted to. He kept staring at my lips."

"Ooh. I love it when they do that. They always look so sexy."

Clay definitely looked sexy, standing in my kitchen in nothing but his underwear, his hands on my arms, my hands on his waist.

The thought had me halfway to hard, so I switched topics. "What about Alfie?"

I wasn't really dating him. We only hooked up once (twice if I counted the mutual blowjobs in Whitley's powder room), but he was already saying "I love you" again, albeit in the process of trying to manipulate me. Did that still count as a real declaration of love?

"Who gives a fuck about Alfie? He's a dick. And just 'cause you like getting his dick doesn't mean you should be with him."

"She's right," Dr. Herrera said, stepping out of her office, coffee mug in hand. "A hard dick will wane. But a selfish dick will be an asshole forever."

"Jesus Christ, Mom!" I shook my head, mystified. "That is the most confusing and disturbing sentence I think I've ever heard you say."

Dr. Herrera raised her mug in the air and headed toward the kitchen. "It's the truth, *mijo* . If you sleep with men, you're gonna have to learn it sooner or later."

I leaned over to Carrie and whispered, "Sometimes I can't believe people actually pay your mom for advice."

"I heard that, you little shit."

"Sorry. You know I love you."

"Yeah, yeah. That's what they all say."

I laughed. It was obvious where Carrie got her brashness. She and her mother had the same honest-to-a-fault nature.

Carrie let out an irritated grunt. "Just ignore her."

I shifted to face Carrie. "I wouldn't mind her input. She is a professional."

Carrie rolled her eyes. "Ugh! Fine."

"Hey, Mom!" I called out.

Dr. Herrera walked in to stand behind the sofa. She'd exchanged her coffee mug for a glass of red wine. "Yes, my darling boy."

"What do you think I should do?"

"I didn't hear anything you guys said before 'He's a dick.' Fill me in."

I gave her a quick summation of my relationship with Clay and this new development.

"Don't do anything," Dr. Herrera said, waving the hand holding the wineglass, sloshing the red liquid inside dangerously close to the edge, above the white sofa. "Let him lead the way. You, of all of us, know best what he's going through. This was probably his way of reaching out without risking too much."

That made sense. Clay could always backtrack on the "date" idea if he wasn't into it. I would just have to show him a great time and hope for the best.

"Thanks, Mom," I said.

Dr. Herrera leaned over the back of the couch to kiss the top of my head, then ruffled her fingers in my hair. "Anytime, *mijo* ."

After Dr. Herrera left, Carrie grabbed my arm. "Can we talk about how hot Clay is? I've never seen him without a shirt before."

I shook my head. "I don't want to go there until I know how he feels. I can't get my hopes up."

"Spoil sport." Carrie grabbed the remote off the coffee table and turned on the TV. "What country of *Drag Race* are we on now?"

"UK. Season two."

Carrie puckered her lips, clicking her tongue as she searched for the right episode. As the episode started, she pulled the blanket off the back of the couch, tossing it across both our laps, and leaned over to lay her head on my shoulder. All was well again.

Chapter 34 - Run

- *Emmett* -

At school the next day, I could barely keep my focus, distracted by the thought of what awaited me at the end of the day. Three of my teachers called me out for not paying attention.

At lunch, I sat down at the end of one of our long mahogany dining tables flanked by Carrie and Dan. He sat quietly, focused on his three chocolate pudding cups. Makenzie was on his other side, chatting with a group of junior girls who'd taken up residence next to us. I pulled out my phone, uninterested in their speculation about Jessalyn Martin's sudden increase in bust size. So she may have gotten a boob job. Who cared? It was her body, let her do what she wanted with it.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw the notification on my lock screen. A text from Clay. I couldn't see the message since I'd set my phone to hide the content of notifications while locked. I didn't want to risk another situation like the time Alfie sent an unsolicited dick pic. My phone was sitting face up on the dining table—my first mistake—and my mother looked down when the message came through. She saw it, which led to a humiliating conversation about sending nudes.

I unlocked the phone and clicked on the messages app. Chewing on my bottom lip, I scanned the words.

CLAY: *Sitting n calc bored to death. Thinkin bout u & all teh fun we cold b having right now instead of this shit.*

The time stamp was from ten minutes ago.

Those words—" *Thinkin bout u*"— made my heart flutter.

I wondered if Clay would get it if I sent a reply. I decided to chance it.

EMMETT: *Same. I wish we could just skip out.*

Five seconds after I hit send, a reply popped up

CLAY: *Want to?*

I pressed my lips tightly to avoid grinning. Spending the afternoon with Clay, while I should be in history or chemistry, was an offer too tempting to pass up.

EMMETT: *You'd have to pick me up.*

CLAY: *On my way.*

Was I really doing this? I could text Clay back that I was kidding—though I wasn't at all. I could back out right now. But I didn't want to. I wanted to see him. My heart was already racing at the prospect.

I knew Carrie would aid my escape if I asked, but I didn't want everyone at the table to know, so I sent her a text. She checked her phone after it dinged. Her eyes jumped up to meet mine. Her lips spread into a grin. I knew without her having to say it. She was in.

"Emmie, I need something in my locker," Carrie said, hooking her purse in the crook of her elbow. "Walk with me?"

"Sure." I tried to keep my voice even. I'd never done anything like this.

My pulse pounded out an unsteady rhythm as I stood up. Carrie took my hand as we headed into the hall. Rather than turning left toward our lockers, Carrie pulled me to the right.

"You can't go through the front gate," Carrie mumbled.

" *Really ?* Because my plan was just to walk right out."

Heron Prep made sure students couldn't leave without permission by having a gate with a security guard—Stu—who manned the gatehouse. Stu wouldn't let anyone exit early without word from the front office. If a

person's name wasn't on his list, he would call in to double-check any story they told. There were many tall tales from my wealthier classmates about the absurd things they'd offered as bribes to get through that gate. To use Carrie's word of the day, Stu remained *stalwart* in his duties.

"If you're gonna be bitchy, I can turn around and go back to lunch." Carrie pointed over her shoulder, half turning her torso, like she was about to leave me.

I tightened my grip on her arm, pulling her closer. "Sorry."

Carrie gave a curt nod. "Your best bet is the side gate by the gym. The groundskeepers never close it."

"How do you know that?"

"How do you *not* ? I thought everyone knew about that."

"Clearly, not me," I said. "I've never tried to skip school before."

Carrie reached over with her free hand to pat my shoulder. "Because you're a goody two shoes."

"Apparently not so much anymore."

Carrie cackled mischievously. "And I'm so glad I get to aid and abet your descent to the dark side, young Padawan."

I released her hand to hook an arm around her shoulders. I hugged her to my side and kissed the top of her head.

Carrie somehow got me all the way to the hall outside the gym without incident. "And *voila* ." Carrie gestured to the door at the end of the hall that led outside. "Get through that door and you're home free."

We both paused when the door to the gym opened. Carrie shoved me into the alcove with the drinking fountains and rushed toward the door.

"What are you doing?" asked Mr. Cordova—the gym teacher and head coach of the football team. "Why aren't you in class, young lady?"

Carrie let out a pained groan. I peeked around the corner to see her clutching her stomach. "Cramps. Period," she said, contorting her face in fake pain. "So bad."

"Oh, well, that's—" Mr. Cordova shook his head, sounding distressed "—that's okay then."

I covered my mouth, holding back a laugh. For people so obsessed with vaginas, straight guys had such a weird aversion to periods. Even the mention of it sent them cringing away like the woman just confessed to having an incurable contagious disease.

"I need to sit down," Carrie said, pointing to the gym door. "Could you help?" She clutched his elbow, not giving him a choice.

Mr. Cordova grumbled a bit, but he agreed, opening the door for her. Carrie stuck her free hand out behind his back and waved for me to go.

Once the door was almost closed, I sprinted to the exit. I was overtaken by exhilaration when I made it. Just a few feet away, the utility gate stood wide open, just as Carrie said.

"Hey!" a deep voice shouted.

I startled at the sound, my joy souring. I was so close. Clay was just on the other side of the gate.

I thought about making a break for it, but my bravery was quickly waning.

Instead, I turned toward the voice. It was the hot gardener. The one with the abs who always lifted his shirt to wipe sweat off his face. Many of my freshman year fantasies featured the gorgeous man. He looked to be in his mid-twenties. The name stitched on his chest was Greg.

"Playing hooky?" Greg asked.

"That was the plan."

"You're the third one today."

"I am?"

Greg nodded. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, which made him lose major hot points. I made out with a smoker once. He stank of stale smoke and his mouth tasted like bitter ash. It was a shame because he was a great kisser.

"Got a light?" Greg asked.

I patted my pockets as if I could find one by magic. "Sorry."

Greg removed the cigarette from his lips and stuffed it back into the pack. "So, you doing something special or just ditching to get out of a test?"

"I'm meeting someone."

"A lovers' tryst, huh?" Greg chuckled.

"I don't know yet. Hopefully." I raised my hand with my fingers crossed.

"Good luck, kid. I'm rooting for you." He gestured to the gate. "Better get going before your lady thinks you're standing her up."

"Right." I smiled politely—choosing not to bog down Greg with the details of my sex life—and jogged through the gate. I crossed the street and walked down the block to the gas station where I'd told Clay to meet me.

Chapter 35 - You're All I Need to Get By

- *Clay* -

Chewing on my lip, I pulled into the gas station down the street from Heron Prep. Emmett sat on the curb outside the store, sipping on a giant Coke slushy. His whole body perked up when he noticed my car. He hopped up, brushing off the seat of his pants. An adorable grin spread across his face.

That's not what today is about , I reminded myself.

I just wanted one last day with Emmett, as I had him now. I had practiced the words to tell him how I felt, but that was for tonight. Today, I wanted time with my friend. In case Emmett rejected me and things got weird between us. Or if he didn't and...

Nope . I stopped myself from going down that road. I didn't want to get my hopes up. It would only hurt that much more when they inevitably got dashed.

One way or another, at the end of this day, everything would change between us. Even if Emmett still wanted to be my friend, things wouldn't be the same once he knew my feelings.

I pulled into the parking spot in front of him. When he opened the car door, I whistled suggestively. "Look at you, Mr. Sexy- GQ -Man."

I had never seen Emmett in his full uniform, except in pictures. He usually changed out of it before I saw him. Or he'd stripped all the components down to the basics, only leaving his khaki pants and white button-down.

Emmett laughed as he got in. He held his cup toward me, already loosening his striped tie. "Want some?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

I took the cup and sipped on it. Emmett shrugged out of his blazer, tossing it into the backseat. He unbuttoned the top three buttons on his shirt, giving a glimpse of the olive skin beneath. It gave me a charge. It seemed weird to feel so excited by the sight of a bit of his chest, given that I had already seen him fully shirtless.

"Woah, greedy," Emmett said, reaching for the cup. "I said some. Not the whole damn thing."

I gave a sheepish grin. "Sorry."

"You're lucky you're cute."

A lump formed in my throat. I fought off a smile, using backing the car out of the space as an excuse to turn my head—even though I had a backup camera.

Emmett really just said that.

I wondered if I could make it to tonight without confessing. The butterflies in my stomach seemed particularly agitated, knowing the clock was ticking down before the big moment.

"You know, I was mostly joking when I asked you to ditch class," I said, pulling onto the road. "I can't believe you said yes."

The joy I felt when Emmett agreed took it from a joke to a necessity. I had to see him. The sooner the better.

"Now you tell me." Emmett nudged my arm and laughed.

There it was. A genuine Emmett laugh. The dazzling smile that accompanied it melted my insides to goo. I just wanted to lunge across the car and smash my lips against Emmett's in a sloppy, ferocious kiss that told him how I felt without needing a single word.

Emmett placed the empty cup in the cup holder. "Was it hard for you to sneak off campus? 'Cause it was a bitch for me."

"Not really." I shook my head. "I just walked out of the building when the bell rang and went straight to my car and left."

"I kinda hate you. Carrie had to fake cramps to get me out the door."

"Ha!" I would have to remember to be extra nice to Carrie next time I saw her. "So I guess that means you guys made up, huh?"

"Yeah. It's hard for us to stay mad at each other too long."

"I'm glad," I said, sincerely meaning those words. I reached over and gave Emmett's leg a squeeze. I let my hand linger a moment longer than necessary. "I know how much she means to you."

"She's my favorite person." Emmett said. A moment later, he snickered to himself, looking out the window. "Although, she's had some competition recently."

I squeezed the steering wheel with a death grip as my chest filled with fire. He had to be talking about Duke. That was a recent development. I couldn't think of another person who'd come into his life since we met.

I pushed thoughts of Emmett and Duke from my mind. I refused to ruin today with jealousy. Especially if it ended up being my last with Emmett.

"Did you actually have any ideas for what we could do? Or is this a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants operation?"

"The latter," I said.

We both laughed as I slowed to a stop at a red light. I looked over and found Emmett looking back. I stared deeply into his green eyes, getting lost in them. The golden ring around his pupils stood out more vividly than usual today.

A horn blared, snapping me out of my daze. I chuckled self consciously and pressed down on the accelerator, fixing my eyes on the road.

No more longing stares , I vowed. Friends don't give friends longing stares.

"Want to just hang out at the park?" Emmett asked.

"Which one?"

"Crestview. They always have food vendors and I'm starving. I was at lunch when I got your text."

"Sounds like a plan," I said, taking the turn to head that way.

It surprised me to find so many people in the park at twelve-thirty. They had the same idea as Emmett, all here for their lunch breaks. The vendors congregated in one section of the park near the parking lot. A few brave souls chose hotdogs that were fished from a vat of grayish water in a wheeled cart. Everyone else lined up at the three food trucks selling tacos, sushi, or burgers.

Emmett scanned each of the chalkboard menus, declaring the specials of the day. He'd deconstructed his uniform even further by untucking his shirt and rolling his sleeves up past his elbows. "I kinda want sushi."

"I don't really like fish," I said, "but you go ahead. I'll grab a taco."

"Okay." Emmett nodded. "We'll meet over at the picnic tables."

Ten minutes later, we sat on opposite sides of a table. Emmett with his spicy tuna rolls; me with chicken tacos.

"I think you'd like it if you tried it." Emmett held up a piece of sushi, waving it around to tantalize me.

"I'm sure I wouldn't. I was downplaying it before. I can't stand fish or any fishy-type food."

"You don't know what you're missing." Emmett stuffed the whole bite into his mouth, making his cheeks puff out as he chewed.

I smiled, resting my head in my hand. "I think you're just trying to get me to try your sushi, so I'll let you taste my tacos."

"I resent the implication that I'm that manipulative."

"Okay then." I shrugged, reaching for the remaining half of my taco. "I guess I'll just have to finish it."

Emmett's arm shot out. He grabbed the edge of the box. "Well, hold on there. I'm not *not* interested in trying it."

"I knew it!" I pushed the box toward Emmett. "You can have the rest."

Emmett grinned wide and picked up my half eaten taco. He chomped down on it without hesitation. The sharing thing wasn't as satisfying as I hoped it would be, but once I started it seemed harder to stop and have to come up with a reason why, than to just keep doing it.

After eating, we walked over to the large three-tiered fountain that was at least twenty feet wide. Emmett hopped on the wall and did a balancing act along the narrow ledge. When he wobbled a bit, and it seemed like he was about to lose his balance, I jumped into action and grabbed his hand to steady him.

Emmett smiled down at me. "You're always there when I need you."

I kept a hold on Emmett's hand, walking beside him as he continued his tightrope act. He made three rounds before finally jumping down.

Unable to justify holding his hand any longer, I reluctantly released it and stuffed my hand in my pocket.

This wasn't a park with a playground or much of anything beyond scenery. People mostly used it for walks, bike rides, and the occasional picnic in the grass.

With nothing else to do, Emmett took off his shoes and socks to do cartwheels and flips in the grass. I sat to the side, watching him work up a sweat. I couldn't stop smiling at this beautiful boy who'd captured my heart, acting like a carefree little kid.

Finally, Emmett came over and crashed beside me. He stretched out to the side and laid his head on my lap, staring up into my eyes. "This was a fantastic idea."

"It was." I nodded, brushing my fingers through his silky black hair.

Emmett closed his eyes, a faint smile on his lips. I imagined what might happen if I leaned down right now and pressed my lips to his. Would he reel away or would he grab my face and kiss me back?

With Emmett's eyes safely closed, I soundlessly mouthed, *I love you* to him. Testing the feel of the words. It made my chest throb with excitement. It even brought a tear to my eye, which I quickly swiped away with the hand that wasn't in Emmett's hair.

I blinked and stared up at the sky, doing that nose breathing trick, still unsure if it even worked. But no more tears sprang up, so maybe it did.

"Clay?"

"Huh?" I looked down at Emmett; his eyes remained shut tight.

"I'm glad I met you." He reached up to take my hand from his hair, lacing his fingers with mine. That was the one thing we'd never really done. We might grab each other's hand to pull each other around, but we never just held hands to hold hands. It felt so intimate.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "I'm glad I met you, too."

"Don't tell Carrie, but I think you're pulling ahead in the race to be my favorite person."

A shocked laugh bubbled out of me. I smiled so wide it almost hurt. So, *I* was the recent addition who was rivaling Carrie. Not Duke. Me.

"You're definitely my favorite person." I had no doubts about that.

Chapter 36 - The Best Day

- *Emmett* -

I had never felt so peaceful as I did lying in the grass, my head in Clay's lap. My hand in his. His other hand lazily drifting through my hair. Anyone who saw us probably thought we were boyfriends.

What a thought? Me and Clay. *Boyfriends* .

It's all I really wanted. I'd tried not to for such a long time, terrified of losing him. But a person could only push down their feelings for so long before Vesuvius erupts.

The best part was that it seemed like Clay wanted that, too. I threw out the line about him being cute to test the waters. He turned bright pink, smiling like an idiot. He tried to hide it, but it was impossible to miss.

I spent the entire afternoon acting like his boyfriend to show him what this could be. I even walked around that stupid fountain three times just to hold his hand for a little while. Losing my balance was a calculated move. I hoped Clay would come to my rescue. I thought he might grab me around the waist, but the hand was just as good.

I wanted to bask in the sun with Clay all day. I was so giddy I started doing full on gymnastics routines to entertain him, since there was nothing else to do in the park. I had worried that Clay might want to leave if he got bored. But he never did. Even as we quietly rested on the grass, he seemed content to be there.

Until he said, "We should probably go soon."

My eyes flew open. "What? Already?"

Clay smiled down at me. "We've been sitting here for almost two hours. You fell asleep." Clay tapped his index finger against the tip of my nose.

"And so did my legs."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"You were so peaceful. And I didn't mind. It was nice to sit quietly. I never do stuff like this."

I sat up and twisted to face Clay. "We could do this again, if you want."

"Skip school and hang out in the park?"

"The last part, for sure. The other part, uh, maybe not. I think I could swing one day, but my classes go through a ton of material every day."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think about that. Last semester, my math class barely made it through a third of the textbook."

"Last year, my math class went through *three* separate volumes in one semester."

"Goddamn! That's crazy."

"Guess they want you to get your money's worth," I said, putting my socks and shoes back on.

Clay nodded, donning his own shoes. "I wish we went to school together. Then I could see you all the time. And maybe we would've known each other for years by now."

"You'd hate my school. Everybody's a bunch of stuck up brown-nosers who care more about what you drive than how you act. You could be a total douche, but if you drive a Mercedes, you're totally cool."

"You're not like that."

"Thanks." I laid a hand on top of Clay's in the grass.

Clay stared down at our almost-but-not-quite joined hands. I thought he might take my hand again. His lovely brown eyes lifted to my face, falling

to my lips, then back up to meet my eyes. He seemed conflicted about where to look.

Clay turned his head and pulled his hand away. He jumped to his feet lithely. "Are you ready?"

My momentary surge of hope deflated. "Sure."

As Clay walked forward, something inside me snapped. I couldn't take it anymore. Everything that happened today seemed to prove that he liked me. So why wouldn't he do something about it? Going against all the advice I received from Dr. Herrera and Carrie, I ran up and grabbed Clay's shoulder to stop him.

Clay spun around, his brows knitting together. "What's wrong?"

I took a deep breath, but it did nothing to calm my pounding heart. I was doing this. I was really doing this. "Do you like me, Clay?"

Clay blanched, his lips parting. "I... I.... Of course, I like you. You might be my best friend. And I've known Jackson since I was five, so that's saying a lot."

I shook my head. I suspected Clay was misunderstanding on purpose. "No, Clay. Do you *like* me... for real? As more than a friend?"

A big puff of air shot through Clay's lips like someone had just punched him in the gut. His eyes immediately started tearing up. "I didn't want to tell you like this."

So there *was* something to tell.

Clay shook his head, staring down at the sidewalk. "I just wanted a few hours where everything was okay and nothing had changed. Before I told you."

"So, you were going to tell me?"

Clay nodded without a word, his eyes still stuck on the ground.

"And when you asked me to dinner and called it a date, you meant like a *date* date? Like a romantic kind of date?"

Clay nodded again.

"I need you to say words, Clay."

Clay's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. He finally met my eyes. Tears clung to his long eyelashes. "I'm in love with you, Emmett. And I have been for a really long time."

I was getting a bit choked up myself. After months of trying to hide it and pushing it down, I almost couldn't believe this was really happening. "Since when?"

"I don't know. It kinda started right away. You were so sweet to me at the bowling alley when I didn't deserve it. And then I thought I messed everything up at the ATV course because I was so freaked about how much I liked what happened that I got weird. And you said it would never happen again. And that you didn't like me like that. And you kept saying it. Over and over and over . And I tried not to like you that way."

I wanted to kick my own ass for saying that. I thought it would make Clay feel better. Apparently, it did the exact opposite.

Clay continued his rambling without interruption: "I just tried to be your friend. I *really* did. But the feeling wouldn't go away. It just got stronger. And I can't hold it in anymore. Even if it means I lose you. Because I... Because I want more, Emmett. I want you. I *love* you."

Even though I suspected Clay's feelings were more than platonic, I never imagined such a heartfelt declaration of love. There was really only one way I could respond to that: "I love you, too."

Clay let out a strangled laugh. "W-What? You do?" He sounded both relieved and shocked.

I nodded, feeling the sting of tears threatening my eyes. "I also tried not to feel it. I thought you just wanted to be friends. And I wanted you in my life, even if I couldn't have you the way I wanted you. Which is why I kept saying all that stuff about not liking you."

Clay burst out laughing. He threw his head back to stare at the sky. "You've got to be fucking kidding me?"

"You talking to God now? Or still me?"

Clay laughed again as his brown eyes settled on my face. He reached up to hold my face between his hands and my entire body felt like I'd just stuck a fork in an electrical socket.

"I don't know," Clay said. "But I thought the exact same thing. I was willing to be miserable forever just to keep you."

"Well, how about you keep me, and I keep you, and we stop trying to hide how we really feel?"

Clay nodded, sniffing. "That sounds like a great idea."

"Do you maybe want to kiss me?" I asked hesitantly.

"Fuck yeah!" Clay grabbed me by the back of the neck and pulled me into a deep kiss that left me weak in the knees. But my jelly legs didn't matter, because Clay hooked his other arm around my waist, pulling my body up against him as our lips slid against each other in a beautiful dance that had been delayed far too long.

I lifted my arms to encircle them around Clay, crushing into him as much as I could. There was nothing between us except our thin layers of clothes. It still was not close enough.

Chapter 37 - At Last

- *Clay* -

We were kissing. Emmett was kissing me. I was kissing him. We shared sweet kisses, and deep kisses, and sloppy, sexy, passionate kisses. Emmett's tongue was in my mouth and I loved it, reciprocating. My hands held Emmett as close as humanly possible without us melding into the same being. It was so hot. And it felt so right. More than any other kiss in my entire life. Kissing Emmett felt like what I was meant to do. I didn't even care that I was so turned on, because Emmett was too. So many thoughts ran through my head about what we could do about that.

"God, I love you so much," I mumbled between kisses, twisting my fingers into his hair.

Emmett grunted, "I love you."

Those words started a tingling at the base of my spine; it travelled all the way up my back, down my arms, filling my head with the glorious prickling sensation, like it had suddenly awakened me to real life from a hazy unsatisfying dream. It was intoxicating. I wanted it to go on forever.

Unfortunately, Emmett's pocket started buzzing. He pulled away, groaning. "I hate whoever is calling me right now." He yanked his phone from his pocket as I nuzzled the spot beneath his ear, pulling his earlobe between my teeth.

"Stop." He pulled away again, rebuffing me. His face paled at the sight of the screen. "Shit!"

"What's wrong?" I cupped Emmett's cheek. Because I could do that now, without worrying what he might think.

"It's my mom." He glared at the screen as the phone continued to vibrate. "The school must've called her, because she's at work, and she never calls

unless it's important."

"Why would the school call her?" I asked, dropping my hand from his face to rest it on his shoulder. As much as I wanted to keep doing those couple-y things that had been forbidden before now, this was not the time. At least he was still in my arms.

He stared at me. "Because I disappeared in the middle of the day." He made it sound like I should know that.

I doubted my teachers would even notice my absence, let alone report it to my parents. Half of them never took attendance.

With a resigned sigh, Emmett answered and put the phone to his ear. "Hey, Mom."

"You better have lost a limb, mister!" The phone wasn't on speaker, but Mrs. Noble's voice carried all the way to my ears.

"I'm sorry. I know it was stupid."

"You're damn right it was. Where the hell are you?"

"At the park."

"You skipped three classes to go to the fucking park! Are you serious, Emmett?"

Emmett's face fell as he pulled away from me. He turned away so that his back was facing me. "Mom, please. It's not like I've ever done this kind of thing before. It's a onetime thing. I just needed a mental health day."

Mrs. Noble said something else, but her voice was just a hum now. She must've calmed down.

"Okay... Yeah... I'll see you at home."

Emmett blew out a breath after he hung up. He turned back to me. "I'm sorry about that."

"I get it. I'm sure my parents wouldn't be thrilled that I ditched either."

Emmett walked over, stuffing his phone back into his pocket. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into a hug. "Even if she grounds me until college, today was worth it."

I raised my arms to hug him back, my fingers sinking into his back, making sure this was real, tangible, and not just another dream. I pushed my face into Emmett's open collar and kissed his neck like I wanted to do that day at the pool.

"Today was perfect," I said, kissing a line across Emmett's skin, nudging the collar aside with my nose until it wouldn't budge any further. Then I kissed my way back to my starting point and up Emmett's neck. His jaw. His chin. His cheek. Finally finding his lips again.

After a wondrous moment, Emmett pushed me away. "I really have to get home now. My mom is probably tracking my phone to make sure I wasn't lying when I said I'm on my way."

I nodded. "Okay."

Emmett grinned and held out his hand. I bit my lip as I accepted the offer, lacing my fingers with Emmett's. Our hands fit so well together, like they were sculpted to be intertwined.

We walked hand-in-hand back to the car, only breaking apart to get in on either side. Once we were out of the parking spot, I immediately took up Emmett's hand again.

When we stopped at a traffic light that had just turned red, Emmett said, "Hey, Clay."

"Yeah?" I looked over, finally able to freely examine Emmett without being nervous that I was staring too long. He was so beautiful.

"I love you." Those words, no matter how many times Emmett said them, brought an instant smile to my face.

"I love you, Emmett." I felt excited that I could say them back. That I could say them at all. Emmett was here, and he knew, and he loved me. After weeks of holding it in, it felt better each time.

"You're doing it again—the staring thing," Emmett said.

"Can you blame me? You're incredibly hot."

His cheeks reddened. "Back at ya."

"I can't believe I get to just say things like that to you now."

Emmett laughed. "I know. It's great." His eyes flicked to the side. "The light just changed."

I nodded, turning my focus to the road, still grinning.

I heard a horrible screeching sound just moments before an explosive force slammed into the side of the car, knocking us sideways.

Chapter 38 - Hammer To Fall

- *Clay* -

My window imploded, sending a spray of glass across the car. I instinctively threw up my arms to shield my face, shutting my eyes tight.

A car horn blared incessantly in the distance; it sounded so far away. My head swam as my heart tried to break free from my rib cage.

I blinked a few times, looking around with bleary eyes. The inside of my car seemed untouched, except for the glass. Through the front windshield, spider-webbed with cracks, I saw the front left side of the car was caved in. And we were facing a different direction. The impact had pushed us to face the direction the other car was traveling.

How fast did that person have to be going to cause that?

The other car sat idly in the middle of the intersection. The front of the black sedan was crumpled. The front passenger side tire tilted at an angle that rendered the car useless.

I didn't know why I was focusing on that. It just seemed odd.

A jolt of fear struck through my heart when I remembered Emmett beside me. I looked over to check on him. He was unconscious, his head drooping to the side. But his chest was still moving up and down. He was breathing.

"Emmett." I grabbed his shirtfront and shook him. "Emmett!"

He made a sound, but he didn't wake.

"Hey," a female voice said. "Are you okay in there?"

At my window, a middle-aged woman stared at me with wide eyes and an open mouth. For some reason, I couldn't get past the idea that she was

proudly wearing a shirt featuring Gale from *The Hunger Games* . *Who does that?* He was the worst.

"I called 9-1-1. Just stay where you are. Don't try to move." She raised her hand, pushing at the air.

"I need to help my friend," I said. "He's not waking up."

"Is he breathing?"

"Yes."

"Well, an ambulance is on the way. They should be here any second."

"What happened?" I asked.

She glanced over at the other car. "That jackass was going too fast; he couldn't slow down in time to stop at the light. He plowed right into you. Had to be doing at least sixty-five."

"Is he okay?"

"He seems fine." The woman sounded frustrated. "He's over on the corner complaining about his car being totaled."

"Are you serious?" White-hot anger flared in my chest. Emmett could be seriously hurt, and that asshole was worried about his stupid car.

I reached for the door handle. The woman grabbed my hand. "I told you not to move. And attacking him won't make your friend any better."

"He's not my friend," I said. Then I shook my head, because that wasn't entirely true. "I mean, he is. But he's more than that. I just told him that I love him for the first time and he said it back." I didn't know why I'd just told her all that. I didn't know her, and she didn't need to know our relationship status. It just seemed important to note it. I'd hidden my feelings for so long; I didn't want to go back to that and diminish what Emmett meant to me. Even for a stranger.

Taking a deep breath sent a wave of pain through my side. I groaned.

The woman gripped my hand tight, though not so tight as to be uncomfortable. "I'm sure he'll be fine." She put on a smile, but it was sad and forced. Because the truth was that she didn't know that.

The glorious sound of a siren echoed in the distance. I never thought I'd be so grateful for that ear-splitting wail.

Chapter 39 - The Boy with the Thorn in His Side

- *Clay* -

At the crash site, they separated us into different ambulances. I didn't think I needed one, but the EMTs were concerned with my pain and the large red marks streaked across my right side. They strongly suggested I go with them to get checked out in case I'd broken a rib.

Still unconscious, they wheeled Emmett into an ambulance on a gurney. Knowing that I'd end up at the same place as Emmett, I agreed.

I didn't see Emmett at the hospital. They took me to a long white room with a dozen or so beds. Each space divided only by a thin curtain hanging from a track on the ceiling. Machines beeped and whizzed and whirred all around me. The anxiety and terror of not knowing what happened to Emmett gave me a panic attack that only subsided after they hooked me up to an IV. I wondered where they'd taken Emmett and when I'd get to see him again. I kept asking every person who passed by, but no one answered me. The only reason I wasn't screaming to see him was because I knew they were taking care of him. I didn't want to distract anyone from helping him.

After an X-Ray, the doctor who treated me diagnosed the pain in my side as bruised ribs, probably caused by the seatbelt when I got flung sideways. They gave me ice packs and some pills to swallow. The nurse also put some kind of salve on the tiny cuts that I'd sustained to my face and arms. I hadn't even noticed before they mentioned it. Once I saw them, I couldn't stop staring at them. There were dozens of tiny red lines crisscrossing my arms. My face only had a few. Probably because I raised my arms to protect it.

As soon as the doctor left my area, I called my parents, getting them both on the line so I wouldn't have to explain twice. They both panicked hearing that I was in the hospital, speaking over each other to ask a million

questions. After several minutes of reassurances that I wasn't seriously injured, I convinced them not to rush. I didn't want them to have an accident trying to get to me too fast.

My parents found me about half an hour after I called. They had to pick up Rachel from school and the baby from daycare; both were all the way across town from the hospital.

I wished I would've put my shirt back on after the doctor left, to conceal the basketball-sized bruise on my right side, but it hurt to lift my arm, so I left it off. My mother burst into tears at the sight of me. She wrapped me in a hug that made me wince. She apologized profusely, acting like she'd caused internal bleeding.

Dad pulled her back, holding her in his arms. "He's okay, Laura." He sounded a little worried himself, but he was trying to be strong for my mother.

Dad reached out to grip my hand. "You really scared us with this one, kid."

"Worse than my appendix bursting?"

Dad chuckled and nodded. "That was a tough one, but this still tops it. At least we were with you when that happened."

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"It's not your fault." Dad gave me an intense stare, shaking his head. He seemed angry, but not at me. "They told us what happened. This was squarely on the other driver."

"If I hadn't skipped school, I wouldn't have been there, though."

"We'll talk about that later," Mom said, momentarily shifting into furious-mom mode before she slipped back into worried-mom mode, smoothing down my hair.

"And Emmett..." I paused, my eyes jumping to Dad. He didn't know about Emmett yet. He knew Emmett, obviously, just not the part where I was in

love with him. Mom promised she'd let me tell him and Rachel in my own time.

This might not be the best moment, but I was tired of hiding. If we'd been even a couple feet further into the road this whole could've ended much differently. With fear constricting my chest and nausea churning my stomach, I said, "I think I'm gay, Dad. And I'm in love with Emmett. And he loves me, too."

Mom smiled at me and laid her head on her husband's chest.

Dad had tears in his eyes, but he also smiled. "Okay."

I raised my brows. "That's all you're gonna say?"

"Do you want me to say more?" He squeezed my hand. "I can. I can tell you that I love you. Because I do. Who you date doesn't change that. I couldn't love you more, even if you were my own flesh and blood. Your sister, too."

I looked around, wondering for the first time the whereabouts of my sister and brother. "Where is Rachel? And Teddy?"

"She's watching him at home," Mom said. "We didn't want to bring him to the hospital."

I nodded. I didn't want them to see me like this, anyway. Especially Rachel. She was an overreactor, like our mother. "Can you find out how Emmett is, Mom? No one will tell me anything."

"I'll get to the bottom of it." She released her husband and set out to find someone to berate into giving her information.

"So, you and Emmett, huh?" Dad perched on the foot of the bed. "How long has that been a thing?"

"Today would be Day One."

"Oh!"

"Yeah," I said. I explained why we were together, why I skipped school, and my plan to confess after the party. "I wasn't expecting him to ask me if I liked him. And I just said it. Right there in the park for anyone to hear. And I kissed him."

I raised my eyes from my fidgeting fingers to look at the man who had raised me for the last seven years as his own son, loving me and my sister enough to adopt us. I still remembered the day we asked him to be our dad, officially. We had the adoption papers all ready. He just had to sign it to become our dad. It was one of my most vivid memories. He cried, holding a hand over his face, trying to pull himself together. Finally, he said yes. We all hugged and cried. Then we went out for pizza and ice cream.

He smiled at me.

"What?" I asked.

"I've never seen you like this before."

"Like what?"

"So... *joyful* . You light up when you talk about him," Dad said. My mother said something similar.

"Do I?" I wondered if my feelings were that obvious to everyone.

Dad nodded and patted my arm, careful not to touch any of the cuts. His eyes grew glassy again. His voice was a bit strained when he spoke. "I'm really glad you're okay. I'd hug you, but I don't want to hurt you."

"I think I can handle it. As long as you don't squeeze me like Mom did."

Dad laughed and moved to sit closer. He stretched his arms around me, barely putting any pressure into it. "I love you, kid."

"I love you, too, Dad."

The curtain parted and Mom stepped in again. My heart stuttered, worried about the news. "Is he okay?"

Mom smiled. "Do you want to see him?"

I nodded vehemently. I tried to get up too fast and stretched my sore ribs. I grabbed my side and sank back onto the edge of the bed, grimacing. Fresh tears sprung up in my eyes.

Both my parents rushed to my side, fawning over me.

"I'm getting a wheelchair," Mom announced, fleeing my cubicle before I could protest.

Dad chuckled, laying a hand on my shoulder. "You might as well not bother fighting her. You know how she is."

I sighed, rolling my eyes. "I know." I grabbed my shirt off the bed rail and handed it to him. "Can you help me with this before she gets back?"

He took the shirt and slid it over my arm on my injured side, putting it over my head. I got the other side on by myself just as Mom wheeled the chair in. I was actually glad of the chair. Just putting on the shirt took a lot out of me. And I felt a little lightheaded from all the meds they gave me for the pain and to calm me down.

Dad pushed me, while my mother took my hand, walking by my side.

Around the corner from the emergency room, Mrs. Noble stood in the hallway, talking on the phone. "Yeah, okay. I'll keep you updated. Bye, Peter."

Mrs. Noble looked at her phone screen before slipping it into her pocket. Upon closer inspection, her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed from crying. She set her lips into a tight line.

I felt my bottom lip start to quiver and the sting of oncoming tears. She must hate me. I would hate me, if I were her. "How is he?"

When Mrs. Noble spoke, her voice was thick. "He has a mild concussion, and a fractured radius." She rubbed her hand up and down her right forearm.

Hot tears filled my eyes, pouring down my cheeks. "I'm so sorry."

"Emmett told me what happened. As angry as I am with the both of you, this wasn't your fault." Tears welled in Mrs. Noble's eyes. My mother went over to hug the woman.

"He's awake?" I asked.

Mrs. Noble wiped her hand over her mouth, blinking back tears. "He is. The nurse is in there now. I just came out to talk to his father. Let him know what happened."

"Can I go in?" I pointed to the door, which hung slightly ajar. "Is that okay?"

"Go ahead."

I tried to get up, groaning with the effort. I wanted to go to Emmett. Dad grabbed my shoulder and forced me back down. "Hold on there, Superman."

Mom pushed the door open so Dad could wheel me inside. I held up my hand. "Can I go alone?"

My parents shared a look. Then Mom laid a hand on Mrs. Noble's shoulder. "You look like you need some coffee."

Mrs. Noble huffed out a humorless laugh. "I really could." She pinched the bridge of her nose, sniffing.

"Come on." My mother hooked an arm around Mrs. Noble and steered her away from Emmett's room. Mom glanced at me over her shoulder and winked.

Mom then turned her gaze to her husband. "Mike? Coffee?"

"I'm good, honey." He waved her off.

"Then you can get a candy bar. Or a Coke."

"Oh." He looked over at me, then back to his wife. "I guess I could do with a Snickers."

"I thought so." Mom gave him that "You need to pay attention" look that she got any time he was oblivious to her intentions. It happened a lot.

I wondered if me and Emmett would ever have looks like that. Just one glance and we'd know what the other was thinking. Emmett had that with Carrie. I wanted that special intimacy with him.

As they walked away, I wheeled into the room. The curtain surrounding Emmett's bed was partially drawn, so I couldn't see him when I first entered.

I heard the nurse speaking, asking questions.

"And what would you do if I said the president is George Washington?" Emmett asked. The amount of snark in his voice made me smile. If he could be that snide he was probably just fine.

The woman chuckled. "I'd roll my eyes because I know you're being a brat again."

"I'm not going to stop annoying you until you tell me how my boyfriend is doing."

"I can't divulge information on another patient."

"Then all you're getting are bratty answers," Emmett said.

I rolled the chair forward, to the edge of the curtain. Emmett laid in the bed, his right arm wrapped in a white cast. He also had small cuts across his face. I almost burst into tears at the sight of him. The boy I loved was hurt, and it was my fault. I should've been paying better attention. I should've checked the road before accepting that nothing was coming.

"Hey," I said, my voice barely louder than a whisper.

Emmett lifted his head to look at me. "You're here!"

"I'm here."

"Are you okay?"

I nodded, rolling to the far side of the bed. I parked my wheelchair at Emmett's bedside and reached out to take his hand. I lifted it to my lips, kissing his knuckles.

"How's your head?" I asked.

"Achy."

The nurse chuckled.

Emmett took his hand away to press the button on his remote to raise his head higher. He looked at the nurse, grinning widely. "Janine, this is my boyfriend. I told you he's cute, right?"

Janine looked me over and pursed her lips. She gave a slight nod and looked at Emmett. "He's got gorgeous eyes."

Emmett looked back at me, slipping his hand into mine again. "He's got gorgeous everything."

My cheeks filled with heat.

Janine laughed, jotting something down on Emmett's chart. "You crack me up, boy."

"He loves me, you know?"

Janine nodded, examining Emmett's face. "You told me that earlier. Do you remember that?"

"I do. I just think it bears repeating."

"Okay, doll." Janine hooked the chart to the end of the bed. "I'll be back in an hour."

"I look forward to more poking and prodding."

Janine grinned and left us alone.

"So, I'm your boyfriend, huh?" I asked, raising my brows. That word gave me an unexpected thrill, sending shivers up my spine. I never got that feeling when my old girlfriends called me that.

"Aren't you?" Emmett seemed worried.

I nodded. "I am."

"How about you kiss your boyfriend then?" Emmett puckered his lips.

I set the locks on my wheels and scooted to the edge of the seat. I laid a hand on my injured side to brace it as I pushed myself out of the chair, flinching.

Emmett's face contorted. His forehead creased and lines appeared between his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Bruised ribs."

"Baby, why didn't you say something?"

I smiled and leaned down, pausing an inch in front of Emmett's face. "The pain is worth it to kiss you." I pushed forward to press my lips to Emmett's.

After we broke away, Emmett scooted over and patted the bed. I winced as I climbed up next to him and curled around his body, ignoring the pain.

Emmett pulled my shirt up to see the damage. His fingers hovered over the bruised skin. "Is it awful?"

"I'm kinda drugged up, so it's not that bad." That was a lie, but Emmett didn't need to worry about me right now.

"How is your arm?" I asked, staring at the cast.

Emmett rolled onto his side, so I had enough room to get more than one ass cheek on the mattress. "They've got me on the good stuff, so I'm feeling pretty great right now. Lucky I'm a lefty though, 'cause that would've sucked."

"Maybe, but it ruins my chance to say I'll be your righthand man."

Emmett laughed at my terrible joke. He laid his injured arm across my chest and stretched over to kiss me again. This kiss was not so tame.

I reached up to grip Emmett's jaw, brushing my thumb over his earlobe as his tongue rolled across my lips, seeking permission. I parted my lips, my tongue brushing against his.

When someone cleared their throat, we pulled apart. I expected my parents or his mother to be at the door, maybe even Janine, not Carrie and Jackson. They wore varied levels of shock. Carrie much less than Jackson.

My chest tightened, my breath catching. My stomach was doing enough intense flips to give Simone Biles a run for her money.

There was no hiding what we were doing. Or passing it off as something else. My tongue was fully in Emmett's mouth seconds ago.

When Carrie ran over to hug Emmett, whispering into his ear, Jackson walked over to my side of the bed. He sat in the vacated wheelchair, turning the wheels to shift side-to-side. "Are you okay, dude?"

I nodded, repeating my diagnosis. I even showed them my bruise.

"Ah, sick!" Jackson leaned forward, grinning. My friends treated injuries like badges of honor. Brandon was the current record holder with a broken femur and an eight-inch laceration to his calf from running into a tree after a bad jump sent his ATV off course. "It's worse than that time you crashed your dirt bike."

I walked away from that crash with just a scraped knee and a busted lip somehow. I wasn't so lucky this time. "It hurts like hell."

Emmett's hand grabbed my thigh, pulling my attention away from Jackson. "You said it wasn't that bad."

"Only when I move too much. Or... you know, breathe too deep."

"You aren't supposed to lie to your boyfriend."

My eyes went wide, my mouth falling open. I looked at Carrie, who was smiling, then at Jackson. He just shrugged and said, "You really shouldn't."

Carrie kissed Emmett's cheek and whispered, "I told you he was into you."

Emmett grinned.

I couldn't stop myself from glancing at Jackson every few seconds, worried that this calm demeanor was just an act. Years of bitterly divorced parents had given him the skills to hide his emotions like no one else I had ever met. If this discovery freaked him out, he could be masking it for the sake of appearances.

Emmett laid his head on my shoulder as he listened to Carrie's account of what happened in school after he ditched. The stories blurred together for me since I didn't know anyone involved. The only name I recognized was Makenzie, who apparently was now hooking up with some guy called Dan.

Emmett slipped his hand into mine, intertwining our fingers.

I silently watched Carrie, doing a brilliant job of multitasking, drawing a very good likeness of Eeyore on Emmett's cast with a collection of colorful sharpies she'd pulled out of her purse, along with a speech bubble that said, "I'm glad you're not a sad, lonely bitch anymore."

I assumed that was some inside joke, because Emmett had a playlist called "Sad Lonely Bitches Unite." It was the most depressing music I'd ever heard.

I wanted to talk to Jackson about what he'd seen, and about what Emmett said, but I never got the chance. Once the adults returned, Jackson and Carrie left since the room was so small. Also, there was a sign in the hall

that proclaimed only two visitors were allowed per room. We had maxed that out three times over.

My parents didn't seem very shocked to find me in bed with another boy, arms and legs all tangled together. Emmett's head still rested on my shoulder; my cheek pressed against the crown of his head.

"Hi, Emmett," Mom said.

Emmett waved.

"We should get going," Dad told me.

"I'm not leaving," I said, in a tone that was almost daring them to try and tear me away from Emmett.

"Sweetheart, the staff isn't going to let you spend the night here," Mom said. "That's why they have visiting hours."

"Then I'll stay in the ER waiting room. That's open 24/7, and I doubt they check to make sure I'm a visitor. And even if they do, I have this." I raised my arm to show off the patient identification bracelet on my wrist.

After my parents shared a look, Dad said, "I'll stay with him until visiting hours are over. If that's alright with you, Barbara." He looked at Mrs. Noble. Apparently, her name was Barbara.

Emmett gave his mom sad puppy dog eyes.

Mrs. Noble shrugged. "I don't see the harm in letting him stay."

"Alright." Mom nodded. She walked over, pushing the wheelchair aside to lean over the bed, giving me a kiss to my temple. "I'll see you at home, sweetheart." She reached over to lay a hand on Emmett's good arm. "I'm so glad you're okay, too. And I'm very happy my son found someone so special to love."

Emmett smiled at her before looking at me. "I love him, too."

Mom sighed wistfully. "I see that."

On the way out, my mother offered Mrs. Noble a hug. Dad followed Mom out to walk her to her car.

Emmett rested his chin on my shoulder, staring into my eyes. His hand searched across my torso, sliding up to my face, drawing lines around my lips. His cast was scratchy against my cheek, but I didn't mention it. "I can't believe you're my boyfriend."

"Same." I cradled Emmett's wrist, turning my head to kiss each of Emmett's fingertips. "I love you, Em."

Emmett giggled, like he couldn't hold in his glee. "I love you, Clay."

Chapter 40 - Everything Has Changed

- *Emmett* -

I couldn't recall anything about the accident. All I knew was that I was ecstatic one moment, then I awoke in agonizing pain. My arm was on fire and throbbing. People hovered around me, spouting out words I didn't understand. They shined lights in my eyes. Made me follow along with their finger. They asked my name, the year, the current president. I answered them all, but I had my own questions:

"Where is Clay?"

"What happened to Clay?"

"Is Clay alright?"

If I was in that kind of pain, what must've happened to him? He was much closer to the impact.

The doctors shot something into my IV to calm me down, to stop me trying to escape to find Clay. He was all that mattered.

A different class of pain arose once my mother arrived, furious and terrified. She barked at me for skipping school one second, then kissed my face the next. If the accident didn't give me whiplash, her mood shifts certainly did.

Seeing Clay in one piece flooded me with ebullience—one of Carrie's words. I'd never been so happy to see another human's face in my entire life. Not even that time I got a meet-and-greet with Taylor Swift.

When I first heard about the accident, I worried Clay might take this as some sign from the universe that we were making a mistake. I worried even

more when Carrie and Jackson caught us kissing. Clay went so pale, I wondered if he was going to pass out.

I tried to stay focused on him, but Carrie rushed me and started mumbling in my ear. "I love you so much, Emmie. Don't you ever leave me. And don't ever scare me like that again. I can't live without you."

"I'll do my best," I whispered, giving her cheek a kiss.

Thankfully, it seemed like Jackson accepted the information without struggle or prejudice. Though Clay remained tense—even his jaw muscles were rigid—until they left.

A couple hours after Mrs. Miller left, Clay sent Mr. Miller out for drinks, and I sent my mother in search of a better pillow and more blankets. I didn't really need them. I just wanted time alone with Clay. "I'm sorry I called you my boyfriend in front of Jackson. I didn't mean to out you. I'm just kinda scrambled."

Clay placed his arm around me, bringing me close. He kissed my temple. "I'm pretty sure my tongue being down your throat is what outed me."

"So, you aren't mad at me?"

Clay reached up to stroke my cheek. "With this face. How could I ever be mad at you?"

We made out until our parents returned, at which point we cuddled under the blanket my mother brought back, and watched old sitcoms until I fell asleep.

When Janine woke me for my head check, Clay was gone. I scanned the room, only to find it empty. It was dark outside now, where it had been fully daylight just a moment ago.

Noticing my search, Janine said, "Your mom went down to the cafeteria a minute ago. I'm sure she'll be right back."

"Where is Clay?"

"Your boyfriend got tossed out. Visiting hours ended twenty minutes ago." She pointed to the clock on the wall. It was almost nine o'clock. That meant he stayed with me for over an hour while I just slept.

"Oh."

"He did not look happy to leave, though. In case you were wondering."

I smiled.

"He almost ran into a wall because he was staring back at your door like it might disappear if he took his eyes off it."

"How long do I have to stay in here?"

"Normally, we would've discharged you by now. But your mother insisted that we keep you overnight."

"She's way overprotective."

Janine chuckled. "Apparently, she knows some bigwigs on the hospital board and got some strings pulled to keep you in for observation."

"She probably asked Mom," I said this mostly to myself. I didn't even really mean to say it out loud.

"Sweetheart, your mom is the one who did the asking." Janine brought out her pen light again, asking those same dumbass questions everyone kept repeating.

"It's not the concussion." I pushed her hand away. "I'm talking about someone else."

"You have two moms?"

"Sort of." I explained about Dr. Herrera.

"That makes sense," Janine said, returning the light to her pocket. "Dr. Herrera definitely has a lot of pull around here."

That much, I knew. Carrie's mother was the head of the psychiatric department for this hospital.

"So, I can't leave, right?"

"Are you sick of me already? Or have you got big plans?"

"Clay and I were supposed to have a date— *our first date* —tonight."

"You haven't even had your first date, and he's already told you he loves you. How'd you manage that?" She poked my shoulder and chuckled.

"Our situation is kinda complicated."

"Just wait until your twenties, handsome. You ain't seen complicated yet. The stories I could tell." Janine shook her head, making a humming sound in the back of her throat.

"Can I ask you something? Medically speaking."

Janine gripped the ends of her stethoscope, raising her brows. "That's what I'm here for."

"Can I have sex? Like with the thing?" I pointed to my head.

Her lips spread into a wide grin. She patted my shoulder. "No strenuous physical activity for at least a week, the doctor said."

"Okay. But what about like oral? That's hardly strenuous."

Janine shook her head and placed her hand on her hip. "What makes you think that boy even wants to do that? You just said you haven't even been on a first date."

"We've been friends for a while now, and we've both had feelings for each other the whole time. And what seventeen-year-old guy doesn't want sex all the time? Besides, you saw him. I really want to get on that."

Janine snorted, trying not to laugh. "You are a mess, Mr. Noble."

"It's not my fault that my boyfriend is smoking hot. Can you blame me for wanting to see him naked?"

"Emmett!"

I looked past Janine to see my mother in the doorway, holding a plastic carryout box. "Hi, Mom. We're just talking about my activities after the concussion."

"I heard what you were talking about. And you should leave poor Janine out of it."

I wish she hadn't heard that. But there was nothing I could do about it now. This was worse than when she decided I needed a refresher course on "the talk" about a month after I came out. I thought the first time was uncomfortable, but I wanted to implode when she started in about how condoms were still a necessity, for me or my partner. All this over breakfast. I still wasn't sure I'd fully gotten over that humiliation.

"It's her job to answer my questions." I pointed at the nurse. "She said so."

Janine grinned at me and rubbed my shoulder. "It's about time for me to clock out, anyway. I probably won't see you again before you leave, but it was really nice to meet you, Emmett. I hope everything works out with your boyfriend. You two seem sweet together."

"Thanks, Janine." I saluted her. "It was a pleasure to be in your care. Even if I wanted to strangle you with your stethoscope a couple times."

"Emmett Andreas Noble!" My mother sounded outraged. She even used my middle name. I loved my grandpa dearly, but why did I have to get stuck with his name? I had six male cousins to take the mantle. Thinking on it, I was almost certain at least one of the younger ones did have it as their first name, but no one called him that. He had some nickname in Greek that I couldn't recall at the moment. I wasn't sure if it was the concussion clouding my mind or the fact that I only knew about twenty words of the language. Six of those were numbers (including zero). Most of the rest were swear words.

Janine just laughed and waved as she headed out.

"She knows I was kidding," I said.

Mom walked around the bed to set her plate on the rolling tray table. The salad inside was so brightly colored it almost looked fake. Like the manicured hamburgers they used in commercials for fast-food chains. The food never looked that good at the restaurant because the commercials used everything from glue to hairspray to make it look appealing.

She carefully drizzled the salad dressing from a plastic pouch. "Honey, I was talking to Clay's mother. She said Clay is just now starting to come out to people."

"I know. He just came out to me today. *Sorta* ."

Clay never actually said the words. He never labeled himself. So I wasn't even sure if he was bisexual or something else. He had mentioned at least three girlfriends to me, so it seemed like the most logical label, but there were others that might fit. Then again, he might just be a gay guy who dated a few girls. They existed too.

Mom nodded, as if my statement confirmed whatever she was thinking. "You should take things slow with him. He may not be ready to jump into the more serious stuff just yet."

"I think I was his first boy kiss." Those weren't exactly the words I meant, but they got my point across.

"See, that's what I mean," she said. "Just because you've done things, and might want to do them with him, it doesn't mean he's ready for that."

I nodded. She had a point. I would have to let Clay lead the way on this. Which was exactly what Dr. Herrera instructed me to do, before I ignored her professional advice and confronted Clay about his feelings. Maybe this time it would stick.

Chapter 41 - Do You Want to Know A Secret

- *Clay* -

When I walked through the front door, my mother leapt off the couch and raced over to me. I thought if she had the strength, she would lift me up and carry me around the way she did when I was four-years-old and I clung to her leg for safety. "Are you okay?"

"Pretty much the same as I was a few hours ago," I said. I looked around the living room and walked over to check the kitchen. "Where's Rachel?"

"In her room," Mom said. "I can go get her for you."

I laid a hand on my mom's shoulder to stop her from going up the stairs. "I can manage."

By the time I reached the top of the stairs, I wished I had allowed her to fetch Rachel. My aching side left me winded. I had never been so glad that my room was on the ground floor.

I knocked, staring at the tiny hand painted sign of her name on the door. Our dad made one for both of us. I had put mine on a shelf when I moved rooms, but hers hadn't moved since our dad hung them.

Rachel called out, "It's open."

I pushed in, shutting the door behind me. "Hey, Bean." The nickname didn't fit now that she had gotten older and filled out, but thanks to our dad, she would always be Bean to me.

Rachel spun in her desk chair, her face shining with relief. She raced toward me, but stopped when I held up a hand. Rachel was a squeezer, like our

mom. I already had a stitch in my side from the stairs. I couldn't handle being crushed.

"Are you okay?" Rachel asked.

I walked over to sit on her bed, grabbing her stuffed unicorn to hug. "I wish people would stop asking me that."

Rachel rolled her eyes. Our dad's blue eyes. I always envied her that. She had a piece of him I never would. Though many people told me I resembled my dad, I could never see it when I looked in the mirror.

"You're so stupid. Of course people are going to ask that. You got hurt, dipshit."

I tried not to laugh, to avoid more pain. It was hilarious to hear her cuss in her high, squeaky voice.

"Whatcha up to?"

"Just texting Jenny and Dylan. Trying to do some homework." Rachel grabbed the back of her desk chair, rolling it over in front of me. She sat down, close enough that our knees almost touched. "Seriously, though, you're good?"

I raised my shirt enough to show my injury. "If you call this good?"

A deep line formed between Rachel's brows. She made a tiny distressed sound in the back of her throat.

I pushed my shirt down. I didn't mean to upset her. "I'm fine, Bean. I promise."

"Everyone at school heard about what happened. I nearly fainted in PE when Leslie told me."

"I'm sorry." I wondered how they even knew about it. Emmett or Mrs. Noble could've told Carrie, who would've told Jackson, who probably

shared it with one person, and on and on. I suspected the story got worse with each new telling.

Rachel shook her head as tears welled up. "Leslie made it sound like you were half dead." Rachel let out a snarl and wiped her eyes. "I want to punch that stupid bitch."

She twisted a lock of her pink highlighted hair around her index finger, like she always did when she got overemotional. I loved her hair. I wished many times I was brave enough to try something like that, but my friends would mock me mercilessly if I showed up for school with colored streaks through my hair.

I reached out to rub her knee. "I'm okay, Rach. No need to go all *Kill Bill* on your friend."

"That traitor is not my friend anymore. Sarah heard from Kylie, who got told by Morgan that Erica saw Leslie giving Zack head under the bleachers a week before we broke up. Why do you think I started dating his best friend?"

"Dylan is Zack's best friend?"

"Not anymore. Zack told him he had to choose. And Dylan chose me." Rachel flipped her hair over her shoulder with an arrogant smirk. "Obviously."

"You have the craziest life, little sister."

"No." Rachel patted my knee. "I'm just not boring, like you."

"I need to tell you something, Bean." My heart suddenly started pounding, nervous sweat making my palms slick.

"What?" Rachel sat forward with a grave face, leaving me curious about my own expression if this was her reaction.

No matter how many times I did this, it always seemed terrifying. "I'm..." I took a deep breath. "I'm gay."

Rachel stared down at her lap, her eyes darted around. "Huh!" It was a very anticlimactic response that gave no hints at her actual thoughts.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"I'm just thinking about it." She looked up at me with our dad's eyes. It was almost like he was there with us. Like I was telling him, too. She smiled. "I fully support you, by the way. I'm just having trouble wrapping my mind around it. You're so... *straight*. Just look at you." She gestured to me and scowled.

"I think the fact that I want to have sex with Emmett makes that statement acutely false. Also way to stereotype, Rach."

Rachel gripped my knees. "You and Emmett!"

"Obviously. Who else would make me think about something like that? All my other friends are straight."

Except Duke. Though could I still count Duke among my friends? Did I even want to?

"Just because you have a gay friend doesn't mean you have to be attracted to them." Rachel gave a look to suggest I should know this. "Jenny is gay and I'm not into her."

"Are *you* gay?" I asked, slightly annoyed.

Rachel crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. "Not as far as I know, but I wouldn't be opposed to it if I felt something for another girl."

"Then it's not the same thing. Because I'm pretty sure I am."

"Pretty sure? You just said you are."

"It's the closest thing that I feel fits me. I've never felt like this for any girl, but I also never felt this for any other guy except Emmett. But Emmett *is* a guy, and I'm into him. That's gotta mean I'm gay, right?"

Rachel shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not an expert on sexuality. But I don't think it's alway black and white like that."

"Well, gay feels true when I say it," I snapped. I didn't come here to have a discussion about the semantics of labels and sexual fluidity.

"Then you're gay. Jeez! It's not a big deal." She shook her head. "You know what I mean."

I tossed the stuffed unicorn at her. The effort made me wince. "Why do you have to be so difficult?"

"Why are you being such a drama queen?" Rachel hugged her unicorn to her chest protectively.

"Ugh! Whatever." With a grunt of discomfort, I hefted myself off the bed and went to the door.

"Clay!"

Standing in the half-opened door, I turned to face my sister. "What?"

"Thank you for telling me." Her voice was gentler now, her face softened. "I love you."

I nodded, breaking into a smile, which she returned. No matter how angry or annoyed we got with one another, that would never change. "Love you, too."

I glanced up at her highlights, chewing on my lip. "Hey, Bean?"

After returning the unicorn to its home nestled between her excess amounts of throw pillows and other stuffed animals, Rachel looked up at me.

"Will you dye my hair?" I asked.

A huge grin spread across her face. "I'd love to. But aren't you worried Mom and Dad will freak like they did when I dyed mine?"

I shook my head. "I've got the sympathy card to play." I touched my injured side to remind her.

"What color?"

I didn't have a color in mind. It was spur of the moment; I literally only thought of it standing there, seeing her hair. "What do you think?"

Rachel squinted her eyes, tilting her head to the side. "I'm thinking aqua blue."

I laughed. "Sure. I'll pick up everything in the morning when I go to visit Emmett."

"How is he?" she asked, pushing her chair back to the desk.

"He's pretty banged up, but he'll be fine," I said. "I forgot to mention, he's my boyfriend. We're boyfriends."

That word— *boyfriend* —was so satisfying, I couldn't help but smile.

"I'm really happy for you, Clay."

"Thanks, Bean."

I made my way downstairs to my room. I took one of the pain pills my doctor prescribed and climbed into bed. I fell asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow. As always, thoughts of Emmett filled my mind as I drifted off. This time they weren't fantasies or wish fulfillment; they were real, honest memories.

Chapter 42 - We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together

- *Emmett* -

When someone knocked on the door of my hospital room, I assumed it was another nurse. Maybe they wanted one last spot check before I left. My mother had just left to go sign the discharge paperwork.

"Come in," I said.

I didn't bother looking up; I was too busy getting dressed. I wanted out of this gown, and this room, and this building with that gross hospital smell of too much oxygen mixed with disinfectant and decaying flowers. I hated hospitals. The sooner I could be out of it, the better.

A pair of hands settled on my waist from behind. The action startled me and I dropped my shirt on the floor. Lips pressed against my shoulder, trailing up to my neck.

I closed my eyes to enjoy the feeling as Clay nibbled on my earlobe. He wrapped his arms around me. I wondered if he knew how much that drove me crazy. He must have, because his hand drifted down my stomach toward my waistband.

"I love having a boyfriend," I murmured.

"Is that what I am?" Alfie's husky voice asked.

My eyes flew open. I bucked my shoulders against Alfie's chest to knock him off before his hand got too far.

I spun on him. "What are you doing here?"

Alfie looked confused. "I came to see you. Jackson told me you were here. That you got in an accident. I was worried about you."

He reached a hand out toward my face, but I jerked back out of his reach. I bent down with a grunt to retrieve my shirt, quickly pulling it over my head.

"Wait." Alfie raised his hands, his brows furrowed in confusion. "If you didn't know it was me, who did you think was kissing you?" His face shifted to anger. "Who is your boyfriend?"

I stared at him with a gaping mouth and a racing heart. I couldn't tell Alfie that Clay was my boyfriend without outing Clay. I wouldn't do that. That was Clay's secret to tell.

"Are you cheating on me?" Alfie growled.

"We're not dating, Alfie. We were only together that one time after the party. It's not cheating."

"Then you're cheating on *him* with me."

I shook my head, raising my index finger towards him. "No."

"It's one or the other, Emmett."

"It's not. Because you and me were just having fun. Remember? That's what you said in Whitley's bathroom."

"So you went and started fucking some other guy because I don't give you enough attention?"

"I'm not fucking anyone. Not that it's any of your business. Because you are *not* my boyfriend! And you never will be again after the way you dumped me last year. I was lonely and upset, and you were there. That's all this was." I gestured between us. "And it's over now."

Alfie's lips formed a hard line. He huffed through flared nostrils. When his hands clenched into fists, I wondered if he was going to swing on me.

Alfie flipped around and fled the room without another word.

For a moment, I felt bad that I hurt his feelings. Then I reminded myself why I couldn't be with Alfie in any real way. Which had nothing to do with Clay.

Chapter 43 - Everybody Hurts

- *Clay* -

I bolted from the car the moment Dad got it parked, speed walking toward the hospital entrance. My skin buzzed with the anticipation of seeing Emmett. Kissing Emmett. Visiting hours started thirty minutes ago, but Dad refused to speed up to get there any faster. He reminded me about yesterday's events. "You've already been in one accident this week. Let's not make it two."

My leg bounced the entire drive over. I tapped my fingernails on the door until Dad commanded me to stop.

I couldn't recall ever being this excited about something. When I tried to take a deep breath, it caused pain, and I groaned with the effort. I pressed a hand to the edge of my bruises, pausing until the pain subsided.

"Would you slow down?" Dad called out in the distance. "You're going to hurt yourself."

"I'm fine." I waved off his concern and started walking again.

A tall, well-built Black guy walked through the doors, heading in my direction, head down, the brim of a baseball cap covering his face. He had his hands stuffed into the pockets of a letterman jacket in my school's colors—scarlet and black. I was more concerned with the jacket than I was the wearer, wondering why anyone would wear that on a hot day. It was still early, yet the temperature was at a boiling point, making me break into a sweat just from my short jog from the car.

I felt an ache in my chest—not from my wounds—when the jacket's owner lifted his head to reveal his face.

"Duke?"

What was he doing here? Did he get hurt, too? I wondered what kind of scar he'd be showing off at the next group excursion.

Duke glanced up. His jaw muscles tightened as a deep frown pulled down the corners of his mouth. "You're the one he's fucking, aren't you?"

That's when it hit me. Duke came to see Emmett. They were a thing. I totally forgot about that in the bliss of finally being with Emmett.

I raised my hands defensively. "I'm sorry, dude. I didn't mean for this to happen. I just fell in love with him."

Duke didn't seem to like that. He closed the gap between us in a blur, reminding me why he was such a great quarterback. He was six-foot-three and the fastest guy on the football team. His teammates called him The Flash.

Duke seized my shirt in his fists and slammed my back against a pillar.

I howled as the impact sent ripples of pain through my torso. My stomach turned from the intensity of it. If Duke wasn't careful, he would get a face full of puke.

But Duke didn't stop at shoving. He threw a punch to my stomach, doubling the pain and nausea. Thank God I hadn't eaten yet or I would've tossed it onto his shoes.

"Hey!" Dad screamed. He sounded winded. He must've started running when Duke grabbed me. "Get away from him."

When Duke released his hold on my shirt, I doubled over, hugging my abdomen. The only thing keeping me upright was the column behind me.

I heard the scuff of tennis shoes on pavement as Duke ran away.

Tiny dots of wetness discolored the pavement at my feet. I thought it had started raining until I realized I was crying from the pain.

Dad wrapped his arms around me and helped me over to a nearby bench.
"Are you okay?"

I nodded, though I didn't think I was. My ragged breathing made it even worse. "Oh, fuck!"

Realizing what I just said, my eyes jumped to my dad. "Sorry."

"Say whatever you need to, kid." He smoothed his hand over my hair.
"What was that all about? Wasn't that Duke?"

"It was."

"Why would your friend attack you?"

"He's mad because I'm dating Emmett now."

"He did this because you're gay?" Dad snarled. He'd never sounded more angry about anything in all the time I had known him. Not even when I accidentally hit a baseball through the front window of my mom's car. Or that time he caught Jackson and me sneaking beer into the house. He almost put a padlock on the exterior door to my room for that one. But Mom put a stop to that. She was obsessed with fire safety and couldn't abide having me potentially locked inside a deadly firetrap.

"No," I said. "He did this because of Emmett. Because he's sort of seeing Emmett, I guess."

"You're dating a boy who already has a boyfriend?" His disappointment was evident even before the dreaded, "Clayton!"

Now he was throwing Claytons around, too. I rolled my eyes at the name drop.

I stared at a tree so I didn't have to look at his face and see how letdown he surely was by me. He said, "I can't believe you would do that. And to one of your friends, no less."

I twiddled my thumbs in my lap, picking at my nails. "I got swept up in the moment. I wasn't thinking about Duke. And they're not even really together. They're just fu... um, friends with benefits." Surely, Emmett would have told me by now if it was more than that.

Dad shook his head. "Does Duke know that?" He pointed in the direction Duke ran off. "He seemed more than a little pissed off."

I leaned back and stared up at the sky, still clutching my abdomen. "I don't care what he knows. He's a fucking asshole with anger management issues."

I breathed in slow, steady gusts, trying to move as little as possible.

"Now that one was uncalled for," Dad said.

I looked at my dad, with his furrowed brow and hard set mouth, and apologized. "Anyway, isn't it Emmett's responsibility to deal with his boyfriend drama?"

Dad made a disapproving humming sound in the back of his throat. "It's one thing if you didn't know about them. But if you knew about it and you did it anyway, then you're just as responsible as Emmett."

"Can you cut me some slack, please? I'm new to this whole gay thing."

Dad grimaced and raised a brow. "This isn't a 'gay thing,' Clay. And you know it. It's a decent-human-being thing."

"Can you please not make me feel like a bad person?" I was almost begging. "I don't want to feel guilty about loving Emmett. I've already felt terrible enough about it for months. I just want to be happy."

"You don't have to feel guilty about loving Emmett, son. There's nothing wrong with it." Dad laid a hand on my shoulder, giving it a small squeeze. "But you need to make sure you're loving him the right way. If this were a girl and one of your friends was... *benefitting* with her, I can't imagine you'd ever pursue a relationship."

"If Emmett was a girl, I probably wouldn't be interested in 'benefiting' with him, anyway," I said, putting the word in air quotes.

"Fine. Take yourself out of it. What if it was Jackson doing this to Duke, or to Brandon? How would you feel about the situation?"

I let out a frustrated cry. "Why do you have to make sense all the time?"

Dad hooked an arm around me and pulled me closer. "That's what dads do."

"Clay?"

I turned at the sound of my name. Emmett stood there with his mother. Joy overrode my pain, bringing a smile to my face. Until I tried to get up and the pain slapped me back down and called me a little bitch. I exhaled sharply, grabbing my side.

Emmett rushed over and knelt down in front of me. He took hold of my free hand. "Are you okay, babe?"

"Your boyfriend punched him in the gut," Dad said, sounding none too pleased. I didn't like the way he was looking at Emmett with disdain, like this was his fault. I would've said something if my mouth could form actual words, instead of anguished moans.

"My—" Emmett shook his head as realization dawned on him. He put his cast hand under my chin and lifted it so I would look into his eyes. "I told him I can't see him anymore. He was mad at me, and he took it out on you."

"I think he was a little miffed with me too," I said. "He knows about us."

"You told him?" Emmett sounded shocked.

"He guessed. And I kinda confirmed it when I said I fell in love with you."

"I'm so sorry, Clay. I never should've started up with him again. I was thinking of you the whole time. I wanted you so bad. And that was the closest I thought I'd get to having you."

My cheeks grew hot. I didn't want my dad to hear that.

Dad must have had the same idea, because he stood up. "I'm going to give you two a minute." He walked over to Mrs. Noble, hovering in the distance, and struck up a conversation.

Emmett took up residence in Dad's vacated seat. "I'm also sorry that I cost you a friend."

"It's not all your fault, Emmett. I knew you were with him. But I didn't care. I wanted you, too."

"Well, I'm yours now. And nobody else's."

I hugged Emmett, pressing my lips to his neck. "And I'm yours."

Chapter 44 - This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things

- *Emmett* -

"I hope you enjoy this," Mom said as we all took a seat at a table in IHOP. I was starving after leaving the hospital. I refused to eat the offering of dry toast, powdered eggs, and link sausages that smelled vaguely reminiscent of dog food. Clay and I sat on the bench side, while Mr. Miller and my mother sat in the chairs opposite us. "Because you're grounded for skipping school, young man."

"What about Clay?" I asked, looking from my mother to my boyfriend.

"Clay is also grounded," Mr. Miller answered. "Nowhere but school and home for a week."

"Only one?" Mom asked. She clearly didn't believe that was enough. "I was thinking three."

My mother was not someone to be crossed.

"We thought one week was fair since he's not getting his car back," Mr. Miller said.

"Wait, what!" Clay's outburst garnered stares from a few of the other diners. "The accident wasn't even my fault."

"You broke our trust, son." Mr. Miller tapped his finger harshly against the tabletop. "You used the car to leave school without permission. End of story."

Clay huffed a sharp gust of air before pressing his lips into a tight line. The muscle in his jaw tightened as he gritted his teeth.

I laid my left hand on the bench between us, palm up. Clay took it, lacing his fingers between mine. His rigid mouth and hard eyes relaxed, glancing over to me. I smiled at him. One side of Clay's mouth lifted to offer me a tiny smile.

I turned to my mother. "I actually meant what about Clay and me? Our relationship. Are you not going to let us see each other?"

Clay's mouth and eyes went wide with shock. He obviously hadn't considered that. He looked at his father. "You're not gonna do that, are you, Dad?"

Mr. Miller seemed conflicted. "Honestly, your mother and I never thought of that. But we didn't let you see Dinah that time you got grounded for coming home after curfew."

"Yeah, but I still saw her at school every day," Clay fired back, lines of distress creasing his forehead. "Emmett and I go to different schools. If you don't let me see him at home, I won't see him at all."

The waitress appeared to take our drink order, temporarily halting the conversation. Once she'd gone, Mom glanced between us, then she looked at Mr. Miller. "If your wife agrees, I believe we might be able to set up some sort of supervised visitation."

Was this prison?

Still, any time with Clay was better than none. I would take whatever I could get.

Mr. Miller hummed with approval. "That actually sounds like a nice compromise. I'll talk to Laura tonight. We'll call you to hash it out."

Mom nodded. She picked up her menu, looking it over. "So, what's everyone having? I'm thinking crepes."

Clay and I shared a glance. We finally had each other. Now our parents were threatening to tear us apart.

Clay mouthed, "I love you."

I repeated the gesture, giving Clay's hand a squeeze.

Chapter 45 - Dancing With Our Hands Tied

- *Emmett* -

The day after we received our verdicts, Clay and I cuddled on the couch in my living room, watching the gloriousness of Jamie Lee Curtis and Toni Collette in *Knives Out*. Normally on a Sunday, Clay would have Bro Time with his friends, but he wasn't allowed to see them. Which worked out well for me.

An hour into the movie, Clay told me he thought he might have a crush on Chris Evans. "Something about the way he wears that sweater is really doing things to me."

"The line to get sweet, sweet love from the best Chris forms behind me," I replied.

"He's The One Chris to Rule Them All," Clay said, in a not-too-terrible impression of Cate Blanchett.

"I know you're quoting from the movie, but for future use, literary references are totally like dirty talk for me."

"Good to know." Clay grinned, nuzzling my neck. Suddenly, he gasped and turned back to the TV. "He's back."

I giggled at his excitement, laying my cast on my leg next to the spot where his hand gripped my thigh. My fingers caressed his, stroking the back of his hand up to his wrist where the thin layer of his arm hair started.

He leaned in very close, practically pressing his lips to my ears, because my mother was sitting in the dining area ten feet away, and whispered, "You know, since we're boyfriends, we could always just have a threesome and share him."

I burst out laughing. Mostly out of shock. I wasn't used to him talking like this. Four days ago, he was my friend with whom I specifically never talked about sex. Now he was my boyfriend and suggesting a threesome with me and Chris Evans. What a time to be alive!

My mom appeared at the end of the couch, hands on her hips, staring at the screen. Apparently, having fun was no longer allowed. She looked over at us and Clay pulled away, putting a few inches between us. "I have to go upstairs to get my laptop."

"Okay." I rolled my head to the side to glare at her petulantly. "Thanks for the update."

She gave her patented "You're pushing your luck" glare. That was always her first warning. And she only ever gave one. She went up the stairs, leaving us alone for the first time since the hospital.

Once she left, I rolled halfway on top of Clay, putting my leg between his to keep myself propped up enough to avoid putting pressure on his injured side. I pressed my lips to his. The action stunned him rigid at first, before he quickly relaxed into it, even reaching down to grab my ass as I grinded against him. I went from a limp noodle to the Washington Monument in seconds. He got there just as fast.

When I heard footsteps thudding down the stairs, I rolled away, back to my former spot, gasping for breath, my heart racing. Clay was also panting, giving me a look of desperation. I leaned in quick to plant a peck on his lips. Then I grabbed a throw pillow and shoved it into his lap, pulling the knit blanket across me. We didn't need my mother seeing *that*. He rested his arms on top of the pillow and stared at the TV.

It suddenly occurred to me that more than half the time we spent watching movies in my bed, Clay had a pillow in his lap. How did I not put that together before now?

After Mom went back to her seat at the table, opening her laptop and putting in earbuds, I leaned close to him, still keeping my voice low in case

she was using transparency mode or Live Listen. "Were you horny all those times in my bed?"

Clay's eyes went wide. He threw a glance over the back of the couch to the dining area. "Did you really not know? 'Cause I was always terrified you might."

I shook my head. My God, I was so fucking stupid.

As if we shared a brain, Clay said, "For such a smart guy, you're incredibly dense." He pressed a kiss to the corner of my lips, smiling, before focusing on the movie as the final act played out.

As the credits rolled, Clay shook his head, his mouth hanging open. "That was amazing."

"I'm glad you liked it. I love it. But I'm a big murder-mystery fan. *Rear Window*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile*, *Clue*, *Murder by Death*, *Rebecca*— the original 1940 version, of course."

"Yeah, see, *Clue* is the only one of those I recognized. And only because my dad loved that movie. I watched it so many times with him. I probably could recite Mrs. White's flames speech by heart."

Without prompting, Clay proceeded to quote the line with the same deranged brilliance as Madeline Kahn. "Flames... flames... on the side of my face... breathing... breathless... heaving breaths." He even did the claw hands at the side of his face. He laughed. "She's the best part of that movie. And the way she arrives 'looking pale and tragic,' dressed in black with her little widow's veil, but they open the coat with that gorgeous white satin lining. Perfection." He did a chef's kiss.

"See, if you had just said that sentence a long time ago, I totally would've known you aren't straight."

He laughed again. "Well, that would've saved us some heartache." He stealthily glanced back at the dining room, then ducked down below the back of the couch and kissed me, even slipping his tongue through my lips.

It didn't last long, because we didn't want to chance being caught and told we couldn't see each other, since technically we were supposed to be on punishment. If not for Clay's heartfelt pleading at breakfast yesterday, I doubted we would even have this.

As if on cue, Clay's phone screen lit up on the coffee table. He stretched his arm out to grab it and pulled it back to look at it. His face fell. He showed me the text.

"Gotta go," Clay said, sighing in disappointment.

"Maybe next time we can watch *Clue* . I have a feeling Mrs. White's scene isn't the only scene you have memorized."

"And you would be correct, sir," he said. He grunted as he got up, holding his arm across his torso to support his bruised ribs. He waved at my mother. "Bye, Mrs. Noble."

She took out one of her earbuds. "Bye, Clay."

Looking at her, I pointed to the front door. "I'm going to walk him to his bike."

"Alright. Then right back inside."

"Yes, *M ein Führer* ."

"I'm not Hitler, Emmett." She sounded tired. She looked a bit frazzled. The skin under her eyes had gone dark. I needed to remember the last two days had been hard on her, too. "I'm your mother, who loves you, and is trying to teach you that you can't just do whatever you want, whenever you want. Sometimes, actions have consequences."

I raised my cast, waving at it like a showcase model. "I'm fully aware of that."

"Well, go on." She raised her chin toward the door.

I knew I was being a brat to her. She didn't deserve it. She was, after all, allowing me to hang out with my boyfriend while grounded. That was totally not something Hitler would do. For many reasons. Not the least of which was his hatred for gay people.

I followed Clay outside, over to his bike, carelessly laying on the grass beside the driveway. The sun had nearly set. The sky was mostly a deep shade of purple, with a hint of pink and orange in the clouds on the horizon. A few stars dotted the sky in the distance.

"I guess now we're both car-less losers," I joked.

"Well, at least it's good for the environment," he said, picking up his bike. It looked much more impressive than mine. An actual mountain bike for actual adventuring into nature. I just used mine to get around town when I couldn't find a ride.

"Where's your helmet?" I looked around at the empty ground.

"I didn't wear one. We're not even a mile away from my house."

I put my hands on my hips, shaking my head in anger and incredulity.
"Clayton Lennox-Miller!"

He threw his head back. "Ugh! Not you calling me Clayton now too."

"It's deserved when you're being a dumbass."

Clay reared back, stunned. "Excuse me?"

"Wait right there," I demanded, jabbing a finger at his feet.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Shush!"

I stalked over to my mother's car and opened the door—she always forgot to lock it when she got home from work—and pressed the garage door opener. I pressed the lock button and closed her door, heading into the

garage to retrieve one of my helmets. I stomped out and shoved it at him, his hands wrapping around it. "I will not lose you to brain trauma because you want to be stupid."

Clay rolled his eyes, but he put it on. Then he smiled. "You know, that was kinda hot. I've seen you be bitchy before, but I never seen you be bossy like that."

My anger immediately faded. "You liked that, huh?"

"I kinda did." Without hesitation, Clay stretched over and kissed me. As he climbed onto his bike, he said, "I love you."

"I love you, too."

He flashed a teasing smile. "Even when I'm a dumbass?"

I nodded. "I know who I fell in love with."

"Agh!" He leaned over his handlebars and poked his index finger into my chest. "See. Bitchy."

I laughed. Because it totally was.

"Goodnight, bitch," he said, circling his bike around the driveway to point the right way.

"Goodnight, dumbass," I said, walking to the curb.

I watched as he rode away; the streetlight catching him for a moment, bringing him into brilliant clarity before he fell into shadow again. At the end of the road, when he made the turn, he looked my way and held a hand up. I did the same, waiting until he disappeared to drop my arm.

As I headed up the driveway to go through the garage, since I'd left it open, I heard Carrie shout, "Emmie," in the distance. I turned around to see her standing on her front porch, waving a scarf like a war-bride, sending her soldier off to the front-lines. I returned the wave, wishing I could go over

and tell her all about my afternoon with Clay. It would have to wait until school tomorrow.

I laid my cast over my heart, reaching out my good hand toward her as I backed into the garage.

Chapter 46 - I Contain Multitudes

- *Clay* -

Monday morning, Dad dropped me and Rachel off at the front of the school. I hadn't done this since I got my car on my sixteenth birthday. I was embarrassed to be back in this position. I felt like everyone was staring at me.

Not paranoia as it turned out. I quickly realized they really were staring at me. Gawking might be a better word for it. The evidence of the accident was written across my face and arms. I almost wore long sleeves today for this exact reason. But it was so goddamn hot out, I would've had a heatstroke.

"Get a fucking life, losers!" Rachel snapped. She rubbed my shoulder. "You gonna be okay?"

I nodded. "I'm fine, Bean."

She scrutinized me with a look of uncertainty, but she left, running out to the courtyard to join her friends. They had all gathered around Rachel's best friend Jenny to watch a video on her phone. Rachel's new boyfriend ran up behind her and threw his arms around her, spinning her around. He kissed her neck as she giggled and squealed, "Dylan!"

I was glad she'd gotten over Zack. Though Zack probably wasn't as happy about it, since—according to Rachel—her new boyfriend was his best friend until about three weeks ago, when Rachel swooped in. It was astounding the amount of spite one tiny girl could hold. But she genuinely seemed happy with Dylan, and he seemed like a nice guy the few times he'd come around our house. Unlike Zack, Dylan actually made it to his meet-the-parents dinner.

I waded through a current of well-wishers, most of whom I couldn't name if my life depended on it. I couldn't go five feet without someone stopping me

to ask, "How are you doing?" or to say, "I'm glad you're alright." Even a couple teachers spoke to me.

I turned my eyes to the ground, stuffing my headphones into my ears, though I didn't bother playing anything, ignoring everyone, even if they called my name. I pretended like I didn't hear. I had somewhere to be and not long to get there.

Pushing through the exit door at the end of the hall, I paused outside to scan the student parking lot. When Jackson's muscle car roared down the lane, I hurried through the lines of cars toward his assigned spot, three down from my space. It stung to see it empty.

My parents had found a way to lock my phone so I couldn't call or text anyone except them, Rachel, and emergency services, so I hadn't spoken to Jackson since Friday afternoon in Emmett's hospital room. The only person allowed to visit me at home was Emmett—with an orchestra's worth of strings attached.

Before Jackson could get out, I circled to the passenger door and climbed in. "I need to talk to you."

Jackson pulled his door shut and cranked the engine to blast the air conditioning, to prevent us from dying in the suffocating heat already encroaching after just a few seconds of the car being off. "Is something wrong?"

"It's about Emmett."

"Is he okay?"

"He's fine."

Jackson silently stared at me for a long moment. "Is this about him calling you his boyfriend?"

I nodded, my stomach twisting into knots. "I am. H-He... He's my boyfriend. We're together. Dating."

"Are you bi?" Jackson asked, curiously. Then he furrowed his brow, quickly adding, "Is that okay to ask?"

"It's okay with me. And no. I don't think so. I'm pretty sure I'm just gay," I said. He stared at me, examining my face carefully. "Does that bother you?"

"I guess I'm just confused," he said. "I mean, you've had at least one girlfriend every year pretty much since like seventh grade."

It actually surprised me he was the first person to bring this up. Everyone else just took my word for it without question. Or maybe they were just too afraid of offending me to ask. Jackson wasn't one for tiptoeing around the subject. Not with me anyway.

"I was never attracted to any of them. I mean, like, I recognize that they're all pretty girls, it just didn't do anything for me."

"Then why did you date them?"

A reasonable question. One I'd given a lot of thought to over these last few weeks.

"Because that's what I thought I was supposed to do. I didn't even realize I was just going through the motions until I met Emmett and found out how deeply I could connect with someone. How much I could *want* someone." I raised my brows, hoping he'd catch my meaning without me having to spell it out.

"You really had no idea before him?" Jackson sounded baffled. I imagined the actual question going through his mind: *How could you not know?*

I had wondered that every day since these feelings emerged. I used to assume that gay people just always knew, but were too afraid to say it out loud at first. I never knew it could sneak up on someone like it had for me. It was all so much more complicated than I thought.

I shook my head. "Not a clue. I thought I was just broken somehow. Emotionally stunted. Like I would never feel things the way other people

do." I assumed that was a result of losing my dad. Experiencing such a profound loss at such a young age will mess up a kid. At least that's basically what my therapist said when I started having panic attacks at the ripe old age of nine.

"And Emmett changed that?"

"Yeah. I finally understood what you guys meant when you talked about the girls you wanted to sleep with. I honestly thought y'all were being overdramatic about craving it."

"We probably were, to be honest."

"No, but, seriously, dude." I grabbed his arm. "I didn't know how visceral attraction could be. I wanted Emmett so fucking bad from that day at the course. You don't even want to know what I thought about doing to him out there when he put his arms around me."

Jackson laughed and clapped me on the leg. "And here all this time I thought you were just a gentlemen. Guess you just needed to meet the right person to bring out your inner horndog."

"Shut up." I shoved him and we both laughed. "It's not just that I want him, though. He also made me get the way people talk about love, which is something I never really thought I'd have."

Emmett shined light into the dark recesses of my broken heart, mending the cracks with every laugh and smile that he saved for me. Every kiss and touch, every *I love you*, brought me closer to feeling like an actual human being.

"You love him?" Jackson raised his brows in shock, a hint of amusement playing at his lips.

He probably thought it was way too soon to be making such declarations. But to him, I'd been with Emmett for three days. I'd been living with these feelings for nearly two months.

"I do." I bit my bottom lip, nodding.

Jackson gripped my shoulder, staring into my eyes rather intensely. "I hope you know this doesn't change anything between us. You're still like my brother, no matter where your dick points you."

"That may be my favorite response so far," I said, cracking a smile.

Jackson rubbed a hand over his stubbly chin. "Honestly, for real, I love you so much more than my actual brother."

"That's not really saying much. Your brother is an asshole."

Jackson pushed his lips to one side, nodding. "I can't argue with that."

Lucas was four years older than us and he used to delight in torturing Jackson with headlocks, noogies, and pantsing him in public places—most notably a public pool when Jackson was fourteen, exposing Jackson's business to two dozen strangers and several of our friends. Thankfully, Lucas went to college the year we started high school. I couldn't imagine the hell he'd wreak on Jackson if they attended the same school.

A few rows over, Duke got out of his SUV, once again wearing his letterman's jacket, despite the heat. My muscles tensed, my blood running cold.

Seeing my reaction, Jackson said, "You know about him and Emmett, right? They're like a thing."

I gave a slight nod. "That's over. Duke didn't take it so well. He punched me in the gut."

"So he knows about you guys?" Jackson sounded concerned.

"Yeah." I turned to Jackson, gripping his arm. "But nobody else at school knows. Except Rachel and Summer. And I'd like to keep it that way."

"I won't say anything." Jackson peered out the windshield at Duke. "But he might. You know how vindictive he can be when he feels like he's been

screwed over. Remember when Courtney cheated on him sophomore year?"

Courtney's windshield got shattered by a brick the same day Duke found out. Someone also scratched "whore" on her locker so deep it cut through the red paint into the metal. There was no proof that Duke committed either act, but everyone suspected him. No one else had motive.

I shook my head. "I doubt he'd say anything. If he outs me, I could out him."

"You wouldn't do that. You'd never do anything to make someone suffer."

"Of course not."

"No, dude." Jackson twisted in his seat to face me. "I'm saying he knows you well enough to know you would never do that."

I chewed on the nail of my middle finger, contemplating. Would Duke really do that to me? Would people even believe him if he tried? I had always presented as straight before I met Emmett.

But perhaps most importantly, would I care if everyone believed it?

That was a question that needed some serious consideration.

Chapter 47 - Hoax

- *Emmett* -

When the car stopped under the portico in front of school, I pulled on the door handle. I barely got the door opened a crack before my mother caught my elbow. "I'll be back when school is out."

I looked back at the cars lining up behind us, feeling the need to rush. For some reason, I hated holding up strangers more than people I actually cared about. "Don't you have to work?"

"I'll find someone to cover," she said.

"This is ridiculous. You know that, right?"

Her face twisted into a scowl. "You brought this on yourself."

"That's not even what I'm talking about."

She raised her brows questioningly. I assumed this meant she wanted me to elaborate. "I know I'm in trouble, but Carrie lives across the street. It's crazy for you to take off work early and drive out of your way back here, just to take me home. That's more punishment on you than it is on me."

"You're grounded, Emmett. I'm not letting you go off frolicking with Carrie for two hours until I get off."

"We don't frolic. I'm not that gay," I protested. She was not amused by my attempt at humor. "I can call you the second I get home. You can check Find My Phone and see that I'm there. You can even ask Dr. Herrera to make sure I don't sneak over to her house."

She turned her eyes to the side. I could see the wheels turning as she mulled it over. Finally, she nodded. "Fine. But I expect you to call me within forty-

five minutes of school letting out. I know how long it takes to get home from here, even with traffic."

"Deal." I smiled as I retrieved my messenger bag from the footwell. I got out, rushing away before she could change her mind.

After a few uncomfortable run-ins with randoms who wanted to hear about the accident, Dan caught up to me, wearing a hoodie in place of his blazer and a beanie to cover his mop of hair. His backpack jingled from his collection of buttons and pins, everything from political support to obscure anime characters. He even had a rainbow pin with the words IF YOU'RE NOT AN ALLY YOU'RE AN [peach emoji] [hole emoji].

"Are you okay, dude?"

I nodded, gripping my messenger bag strap tight with my good hand. "I'm fine. And I really don't want to talk about it."

"That's cool. I just wanted to make sure. I tried to come over on Saturday, but your mom said you were resting. And also that you're grounded for ditching."

I offered another nod. I didn't feel like speaking.

"I just wanted to say—" he clapped me on the shoulder gently "—I'm glad you're not dead and all."

I actually laughed at that. "Thanks."

Dan meant well. He just was not so good with seriousness and emotions. That's why it took him five years to confess his feelings for Makenzie. He showed his love with sarcasm, jokes, and inappropriate comments.

When he received a text, he took out his phone. "Mak just said they have cinnamon rolls in the caf. So unless you're gonna, like, cry..." He pointed over his shoulder.

I flicked my chin to the side. "Go. Gorge yourself until you barf. And maybe aim at Whitley if you do."

He gave an unironic thumbs up. "I'll do my best."

I barely made it through the door of the building that housed my locker before Carrie tackled me in a hug. Her golden brown curls were twisted into a double French braid. "Your mother is killing me with this separation. I don't know why she has to punish me, too."

"Need I remind you that you aided my escape? Quite happily, I might add."

Carrie pulled back to grimace at me, her forehead wrinkled with distress. Her face looked rounder—younger—without all the hair surrounding it. "Don't. I already feel terrible about that."

"Don't worry. I didn't rat you out." I brushed my fingers across her cheek. "And I don't blame you. In fact, I'm grateful. If I hadn't snuck out, I might still be pining for Clay thinking he'd never love me."

When I told her that my mother said she could drive me home, and we could catch up on the last forty-ish hours, Carrie squealed with excitement and threw her arms around me again.

"Yo, Emmett!"

Carrie and I separated, turning to Kenny Huang, the captain of the lacrosse team, who hadn't spoken to me since I was outed. "Is it true they had to use the jaws of life to pry you out of the car?" Apparently, gossip was a good enough excuse to interact with the gay kid.

"No," I said, scoffing at the outlandish story. "I'm pretty sure they just opened the door. My side of the car didn't even get hit."

"Well, that's what Landon told me."

"Tell him he's a moron," I said, not even slightly kidding.

Kenny actually looked disappointed as he shuffled away, hooking his thumbs in the straps of his backpack.

That was the fifth time someone I barely knew had stopped me to mention an ridiculous version of the accident. Almost the second I got out of Mom's car, Haley Moore ran up and said she heard it was a five car pileup with multiple fatalities.

"It's been like that all morning." Carrie linked her elbow with my good arm. "People keep coming up to ask about you with these crazy stories. Sydney Wallace said she heard they had to amputate your arm on the street, and it was still laying out there rotting."

"That's gross."

Where did they come up with this crap?

I wasn't entirely surprised everyone knew about the accident. Our school was a very insulated community. There were only forty-six people in the entire senior class. Everyone knew everyone by name, even if they didn't interact socially. And everyone definitely knew me after what happened with Patrick.

I looked around, lowering my voice to ask, "Do they know about Clay?"

Carrie shrugged. "Not that anyone's mentioned. Why?"

"I don't want people to speculate about why we were together. He's barely got a toe out of the closet. That's already hard enough. He doesn't need all this drama and gossip."

"How is he doing?"

"He's okay." I stopped at my locker to put away the books Carrie brought home for me on Friday for my homework. I actually managed to get it all done, despite a concussion and my aching arm.

While I was telling her about yesterday, the bell interrupted us. I groaned, dropping my chin against my chest. I was not looking forward to being stuck in a room, unable to escape all the stares and whispering that were already following me around.

Chapter 48 - You've Got a Friend

- *Clay* -

The cafeteria workers had sympathetic expressions as I passed with my tray, collecting my food. The woman handing out fries gave me a second carton. I was reminded of Emmett's grudge against his lunch lady for shorting his tater tots. It made me smile for the first time in hours.

As I walked through the tables, I wondered if there was anyone left in school who didn't know about the accident.

I joined my friends at our usual table by the windows that overlooked the courtyard. They immediately bombarded me with questions about the crash. Jackson banged his palm against the table twice. "Yo, assholes. Give him some breathing room."

I rolled my eyes. "I figure this is what y'all are most curious about." I lifted my shirt to show off the bruises. They had turned black and purple over the weekend.

Brandon reached out like he was going to touch it, but he pulled back at the last second.

"Does it hurt?" Tyler asked, chomping down half his hamburger with one bite. I couldn't help but think of him by Emmett's nickname for him—Camo Boy. It was more apt than Emmett knew. He really wore a lot of the stuff. Especially that stupid hat that he wore every day.

"Like hell." I let my shirt fall down when I noticed people at other tables staring.

"I saw your dad drop you off," Brandon said, sweeping a hand through his luscious blond hair that he was enamored with. "Is your car totaled?"

"No. Just banged up pretty bad." I exhaled, bringing a sharp pain that made me wince. "Not that it matters. My parents are taking it away for skipping yesterday."

Brandon raised a curious brow. "Why did you skip?"

I shrugged. "I just needed to get out of here."

"Alone?" Brandon seemed unconvinced. "Usually we all do that kind of thing together."

I shook my head. I didn't have a suitable answer. I couldn't tell them I was with Emmett. They knew Emmett was my friend, and he'd even hung out with them a few times whenever me and Emmett would run into one of them out and about. But if I told them I picked Emmett up from school to go to a park for lunch, what would they think? Would they believe it was an innocent friend thing? Or would they see through the story to the truth?

"Maybe he didn't want to have to deal with y'all idiots," Jackson said. "Sometimes a guy just needs peace and quiet."

I glanced over at my best friend, giving him a grateful smile.

"Hey," Tyler said. "How come Duke and Mark are sitting way over there?"

I looked to where Tyler pointed. Duke and Mark sat at the end of the football team's table. That wasn't completely unusual. They were both on the team and occasionally sat with them, but they always stopped by our table first for a few minutes. I wondered if Duke was telling Mark about me and Emmett. I also wondered if Mark knew about Duke. They were best friends, and had been since long before we met them in middle school. Unlike Heron Prep, that went from preschool to twelfth grade, the public schools in town comprised four elementary schools that fed into two middle schools, then everyone ended up at Huntington High.

I didn't have much time to think about Duke and what he may or may not tell Mark because Summer sat down in the empty chair next to me—the seat Duke would normally occupy.

"Hey." She took my hand and squeezed it. "I heard about what happened. Are you okay?"

Brandon and Tyler shared a look across the table. Jackson pretended to be too distracted by eating to look at them. The others probably wondered if a reconciliation was on the horizon. They all said I was crazy for breaking up with her. I wondered if they thought I was angling to steal her away from Shawn. Although, I didn't actually believe anyone could be stolen, unless they wanted to be.

"I'm mostly fine. Just some bruised ribs. And these." I raised my arm to show all the tiny cuts.

"You really had me worried." Summer paused, finally noticing the stares. And not just from my friends. People at other tables were looking now. She looked back at me. "Take a walk with me?"

"Sure." I stood up and followed her out. I'd barely eaten any of my lunch, but I wasn't that hungry, anyway. I didn't worry about it going to waste, though. My vulturous friends would pick over the tray until it was empty.

Outside, me and Summer strolled along the sidewalk that curved around the outdoor patio where a few groups sat at the wooden picnic tables, despite the heat and lack of protection from the sun. Once we got around the corner of the building, Summer asked, "How are you really?"

"I'm fine, Sunny."

She let out a small giggle. "I missed that nickname."

"Well, if you don't still hate me too much to be my friend, I'll call you that all the time."

Summer bumped her shoulder against mine. "I didn't hate you, Clay. I was upset, because I loved you."

"So, no to the friends things then?"

"Of course I want to be your friend, dummy." She tapped her fist against my shoulder. "Especially since I finally feel like I know you. You finally make sense to me." She looked up at me with an affectionate grin.

"Shawn won't get upset that you're hanging out with me? If you need to, you can tell him about... about me."

Summer rolled her eyes. "I don't *have to* do anything. Any boy who requires qualifications for me having male friends is a boy who will not be dating me." There was that fierce, headstrong attitude that initially drew me to wanting to be her friend. She was always the most confident person I'd ever known. She always seemed like she really had her shit together. I admired that because my shit was all over the place. "Besides, Shawn is not an insecure man-child. I told him you and I are friends again the day you came out to me."

"Speaking of which." I looked around to make sure no one was in the vicinity to eavesdrop. Satisfied, I said, "I was with Emmett."

"What do you mean?"

"In the accident. He was in the car, too. That's why I skipped. To go see him."

"Really?" She gave me a proud smile. "Did you take my advice?"

"I did, actually." I told her the story of how it all came about, including the bit where me and Emmett kissed in the park and confessed our love. I lowered my voice, even though we were alone. "He's my boyfriend now, Sunny." As always, that word gave me that heady, butterflies-in-my-stomach feeling. I couldn't get used to it, but I adored saying it. "I have a boyfriend."

"That's amazing news." Summer slipped her arm around my waist. I put my arm over her shoulder. It was just like old times. "I really want to meet the guy that finally thawed your frozen heart. He's gotta be something special."

My cheeks flooded with heat. "He is."

"Tell me all about him."

"God, Sunny, I love him so much." We spent the rest of lunch walking around campus through the paths least traveled by teachers. I told her everything I knew about Emmett. Everything I loved about him. From his obsession with Taylor Swift and his passion for books, to his love of obscure films that only cinefiles had heard of. I told her about all the time we spent together and everything that I wanted for us. Once I started talking about him, the wall I'd built up to keep my feelings secret crumbled; it all just came tumbling out.

It was so nice to talk about Emmett without fear of being ostracized or sneered at. Summer didn't care about me being gay. She didn't care that I was in love with a boy. She sparkled with joy, devouring every word.

I was actually disappointed when the bell rang, and we had to part ways.

Summer pulled me down to kiss my cheek. "I'm always here for you, if you ever need someone to talk to about him."

"Thank you." I gave her a hug. "And thank you for being cool about all this."

When she pulled away, she had a confused look. "Of course I'm cool with it. It's who you are."

"But if you had reacted badly, I don't know if I ever would've found the courage to tell anyone else. I guess you were like my guinea pig."

Summer nodded in understanding. "I get it."

"I love you, Sunny."

She grinned. "I love you, too, Button."

I laughed at the stupid nickname. I couldn't even remember why she started calling me that. I'd hated it when we were together, especially when she said it around my friends. But it was nice to hear now. It reminded me of

how close we'd been. I hoped we could get back to that, just in a new, more honest way.

Summer waved and headed off toward her next class.

Well, now I knew I had at least two real friends I could count on to stand by my side, no matter what. Summer and Jackson both knew my secret, and they still loved me. That gave me hope that maybe my other friends could accept it one day, too.

Chapter 49 - Long Story Short

- *Emmett* -

Carrie and I didn't have many classes together, so I didn't have a chance to talk to her again until lunch. Though upon arrival, I couldn't speak openly. I'd suddenly found myself with a dozen new friends, all eager to learn about the accident. They wanted the story firsthand.

To get them off my back, I told the most basic version of the story, omitting Clay completely. They weren't too pleased by the revelation that I had no actual memory of the accident itself. All my knowledge came secondhand thanks to Clay and the hospital staff.

The group quickly dispersed, grumbling disappointment, leaving only my usual lunch crew. Makenzie sidled up to Dan, feeding him French fries. He bit off half, then she popped the rest into her own mouth. It was gross to watch, but I'd totally do something like that with Clay.

"So what's the real story?" Dan asked, hanging an arm around Makenzie's shoulders. She kissed his cheek. I envied their ability to be so carefree about their feelings.

"I really don't remember it," I said.

"Yeah, but there's more you didn't tell the lemmings." He raised a brow, quirking the corner of his lips. "Am I wrong?"

I shared a look with Carrie. She shrugged, tossing a sideways glance at them to suggest I tell them.

"We'd never tell anyone, if it's, like, a secret," Makenzie said. She reached over to grip my hand. I was a little grossed out because she had licked those fingers a moment ago. Though they were dry, it still made my skin crawl. I tried not to show my discomfort, reminding myself that she was being supportive.

I pulled my hand away, putting it under the table, trying to discreetly wipe my hand against my pants so as not to insult her. "I have a boyfriend."

Makenzie's face lit up. "That's great, Em."

"Since when?" Dan asked. "It's not that douchebag who dropped you last year, is it?"

I glared at Carrie. Had she told them about my lapse in judgement with Alfie, too? Catching the meaning of my scowl, she said, "I didn't tell them."

"Wait!" Dan held up a hand, giving me a look of disappointment. "You're seriously seeing that asshole again?"

"I'm not seeing him. We slept together. But that was it. He and I are done. For good this time."

"So who's the new guy?" Makenzie asked, tucking a lock of her red hair behind her ear before propping her arm up to rest her chin in her hand.

"He's still kind of in the closet. So I can't say much about him."

"Is it that Clay guy?" Dan asked, taking over his own feeding duties.

"What makes you ask that?"

Dan shrugged, dipping a fry in ketchup. I noticed a spot of green paint on his wrist, partially obscured by his bracelets. He must've missed it while cleaning up after art class. He had a habit of doing that, so wrapped up in his work that he didn't notice all the spots and streaks of paint splattered across his skin and sometimes his clothes. Then, after class, he was in such a rush to get to lunch that he rarely got it all off. The day they did charcoal drawings, he completely forgot to wash up and showed up to lunch with black fingertips. I had to grab the sandwich out of his hand so he didn't get a mouthful of charcoal stained bread. "He's like the only thing you ever talk about anymore."

I confirmed his speculation. Only because I knew neither he nor Makenzie would ever say anything. Ever since the Patrick incident, I'd whittled down

my friend group to people I could trust without question, which left only the three of them.

"I'm so happy for you, Em," Makenzie said. "He's really hot."

I blushed a little. "Yeah. He is."

"Well, you got a picture? Let's see him." Dan raised his hand over the table, curling his fingers in toward himself, beckoning me to show him. His painted fingernails kind of annoyed me. Not because I would ever be mad at someone expressing themselves in whatever ways they were comfortable with, but because no one made it a big deal. Because he was obviously straight. If I did that, people would point and say, "Look at the gay boy doing gay things. Isn't he so gay?" Okay, maybe they'd be more clever than that, but not by very much.

I shimmied my phone from my pocket and went into my photos app to find the best picture I had of Clay. I settled on the picture we took downtown in front of the floral mural he loved so much. Clay's sweet smile brought one to my face every time I looked at it.

I handed my phone over, and Dan whistled. "I get it. He's a good-looking dude."

"You did not just say that." I reached over to take my phone back, locking it.

"What? A straight man can't admire the obvious hunkiness of his gay friend's boyfriend now? Is that where we are as a society? Because I don't know if I wanna live in that dystopian hellscape."

"Shut up," I said with a laugh. Carrie and Makenzie were also snickering at him.

Dan held his arms out toward me. "Kiss and make up?"

I rolled my eyes, resulting in Dan blowing an exaggerated kiss across the table.

"I love you," I said.

"Okay, well, now you're going to make me have to say something macho like 'that dude better not hurt you because I'll kick his ass.' But I can't say that because I'm pretty sure he could beat me up without breaking a sweat. I mean, did you see the biceps on that sexy man? They're like cantaloupes. I'm gonna have to start lifting like crazy." Dan shook his head. "Just to defend your honor. How could you do this to me, man? You couldn't find yourself a nice twink?"

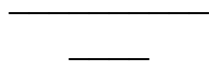
"Believe it or not, whether you can beat a guy up is not a stipulation I consider when looking for a boyfriend."

Dan gave a dramatic scoff, shaking his head. "Jeez, could you *be* any more selfish?" he asked in his best Chandler Bing impression.

Makenzie squeezed one of Dan's arms. She looked over at me and Carrie. "Can you turn a pencil into a cantaloupe?"

Dan clutched his chest. "That hurts, babe."

We all laughed as Dan feigned being horribly offended, going off on a highly sarcastic rant about the plight of the straight man in America today. "Ain't nobody giving us no respect no more."



When classes ended for the day, I went to my locker to wait for Carrie so she could drive me home. I opened the door and stared inside to avoid being spotted by any passerby.

"What are you doing?" Carrie asked, her voice full of disbelief. I turned to see her giving me a dubious stare.

"Hiding," I said.

"You're doing a piss-poor job." Carrie dialed in her combination, opening her locker. "This will eventually blow over. Soon someone will turn up

pregnant or get into a fight in the cafeteria. You'll be old news in no time."

"I hope so."

Carrie rubbed my shoulder before loading her books into her backpack.

"Hey," I said. "I wanted to show you something earlier, but I forgot when Kenny showed up. And it's just been so hectic ever since."

"What?"

"Look." I raised my injured arm and pointed to where Clay wrote on the cast, along with a tiny lopsided heart drawn in red Sharpie. "Is that not adorable?"

Carrie looked up at me with an arched brow. "Who wrote ' *CALM* ?' Is that some kind of self-help bullshit from Mrs. Abbott? I swear to God, she thinks that minoring in psychology twenty years ago somehow gives her the credentials to psychoanalyze us." Carrie shook her head. "Like stick to geometry, lady. If you wanted to give advice, you should've become a guidance counselor."

I rolled my eyes. "It's not 'calm.' And it wasn't Mrs. Abbott. Those are Clay's initials. Clay Alexander Lennox-Miller." I pointed to each letter as I said the name.

Carrie harrumphed. "That seems extremely ironic, given all the disquietude he's caused you since you met him."

"Disquietude?" It was my turn to raise a questioning brow.

"It means to be in a state of anxiety. I have tried hard as hell to work that one into a sentence today."

I chuckled, leaning my head against the cold metal of the lockers, clutching the strap of my messenger bag. "I'd gladly go through all that *disquietude* again to get this result. I love him so much, Care."

"Lord knows you deserve a nice, stable boyfriend."

"I just wish I got to see Clay more," I grumbled.

Before I could go on, Carrie turned away from me to throw a death glare at two young girls who lingered a few feet from us. "Can I help you?" she snapped at them. They didn't even look old enough to be in the high school hallways.

One girl held up a sheet of paper. "Do you know where this is?"

The other girl cleared her throat. "Mrs. Townsend said that's where we'd find the meeting for photography club."

Hearing the teacher's name, I knew I was correct. Mrs. Townsend was a seventh-grade teacher. These girls couldn't be over thirteen. I applauded their bravery in approaching two seniors. I certainly would never have done that at their age. I once took a detour all the way around the building to enter another door to avoid a group of upperclassmen congregating at the front entrance.

I squinted my eyes to read the messy scribbling. It was a room number. "You're in the wrong building, sweetie. You want the brown one with the columns on the other side of the auditorium."

"The one with the shrub out front that looks kinda like a dick," Carrie added, making one of them giggle. The other one elbowed her.

They both thanked us and ran off. "Did you hear? He called me sweetie."

"He's so cute. Do you think she's his girlfriend?"

That made me smile. It reminded me that not everyone knew who I was. I wasn't as infamous as I sometimes believed. It was refreshing.

"What were you saying?" Carrie asked.

"Just that Clay and I have barely had any time alone since the accident. And none since we got home. I can't even call him to have a private conversation."

Carrie flashed a mischievous smile. She dropped her book bag on the floor without a second thought about breaking anything inside and dug her phone out of her purse. She dialed a number and put the phone to her ear. "Hey, babe."

She paused for a moment, eyeing me. "Yeah, no. I don't care." She paused again and rolled her eyes, growing frustrated. "That's fine. Whatever! Give your phone to Clay."

My heart swelled, realizing what she was doing. Nervous jitters suddenly took over.

Carrie frowned. "I'm your fucking girlfriend, Jackson! That's why. Just do it because I asked you to. Christ!"

Carrie handed her phone to me. I put the phone to my ear. I heard Jackson's muffled voice saying, "It's Carrie. She wants to talk to you."

"Hello?" Clay said, sounding very confused.

Sweet Jesus! I loved his voice so much!

"Hi," I said.

"Baby?" Clay's confusion turned to excitement.

"So it's baby now, huh?" I asked, teasing.

"Sorry. That just came out."

I grinned widely, turning to face my locker, so Carrie couldn't see the flush of my face. "No. I like it."

"Me, too," Clay said. I could hear the joy in his voice. I could perfectly picture his bright, warm smile.

I reached into my locker, working the leftover strips of paper through the wire of my spiral notebook. "I wish I could see you without being watched like a hawk."

Clay released an exhausted sigh into the phone. "I know. This is torture. All I want to do is kiss you, and I can't. Not for real, anyway."

Carrie tugged on my sleeve. I asked Clay to hold. I turned to her. "What?"

"I have an idea." She had the tone she got whenever one of her ideas would receive disapproval from an authority figure.

Chapter 50 - Haunted

A/N: CONTENT WARNING: Discussion of a previous homophobic attack. The situation between Emmett and Whitley's brother is fully revealed in this chapter. If you don't want to read the details of the actual event I added asterisks (*) before and after that section so you can skip that part if you want.

- Emmett -

Carrie's idea was brilliant, but so simple. I wished I had thought of it. Just around the corner from my house, there was a house up for sale. It had been on the market for a couple of weeks now. That's where Carrie dropped me off earlier, going off to sit at Starbucks until I called. She hated Starbucks, claiming their coffee always tasted burnt, but she didn't have time to go all the way downtown and back before I had to get home. She also loved the Fuel 'N' Go. We discovered the little gas-station-turned-coffeehouse two years ago by total accident. They'd kept the name of the gas station and the neon sign out front, so I never really looked twice at the building until one day the clouds parted and the sun shone down on the glorious Mecca of caffeine goodness. No. That's a lie. Actually, Carrie had to pee and went inside, discovering the building's secret identity. She ran out and pulled me inside. We marveled at the blackboard menus, the cases of baked goods, and the heavenly aroma of that godly life-giving nectar.

As I sat on the steps of the back patio, watching a bee do its bee-thing with a purple hydrangea, I wondered if it was a crime to break into someone's backyard. And even if it were, was it still a crime if said yard belonged to an unoccupied residence? They had a privacy fence. Even if the lock on it was so shitty, all I had to do was lift the gate and shove to get it open.

As soon as Clay rounded the corner of the house, I jumped to my feet. I suddenly didn't care if it was illegal. Because my smokeshow of a boyfriend was rushing toward me. He dropped his backpack on the pavement to wrap

his arms around me, kissing me. When I accidentally pressed on his ribs, he jerked back, sucking air between his teeth. I apologized profusely.

Clay shook his head. "I don't care. Just keep kissing me."

That I could do.

We moved over to the shade of the patio and he pressed me against the wall, his hands holding my face as I gripped his hips, pulling him closer with my good hand. We were never close enough.

I wanted to ask him to take off his shirt. Sadly, we only had maybe twenty minutes before I had to get home to call my mother. We were seeing each other later at his house for our supervised visitation, which was basically the length of one movie. We always chose something long. I thought of suggesting *Titanic* to get an extra hour in, but I suspected the parents might catch on.

Clay moved his lips to my neck, his lips glossing over my Adam's apple, moving along my jawline. He was very good at that.

I sighed. And not just because Clay hit a sweet spot that gave me chills. "I can't believe we have to live like this for three weeks."

"Speak for yourself," he said between kisses. "I only have a week of this."

At the risk of losing time, I thought he needed some perspective, so I nudged his shoulder to make him look at me. "Do you really think my mother is going to allow us to hang out at your house without making sure we're under Big Brother's watchful eye?"

He looked confused. "What does *Big Brother* have to do with this?"

I shook my head. I wasn't about to waste time explaining *1984* to him. Although, I'm pretty sure when he said Big Brother, he meant the TV show.

"You're pretty."

Clay scoffed, annoyed. "It was a book thing, right? You always give me this look, like I'm some dumb airhead, when I don't get your smarty-pants references."

"It doesn't matter," I snapped. Because we were wasting make-out time on this. "I just wanted you to understand that this surveillance state we're in will continue until I'm free too."

"Well, at least we have this." He waved his hand around the backyard, which was actually quite nice. A huge, immaculately kept flowerbed wrapped around all three sides of the yard and there was even a tiny river rock fountain in one corner.

I briefly wondered how their lawn was so lush and green, then Clay started kissing me again. And who the fuck cares about grass?

A few sublime minutes later, Clay stopped kissing me, to my complete dismay. "How did you know you were ready to come out? Like not just Carrie and your mom. Everyone."

My annoyance immediately faded. This was important. I would make time for this. "Is that something you think you want to do?"

"Well, maybe. Kinda. I told Jackson, even though obviously he knew. I filled in the details for him. I just feel like I don't want this—" he reached down to intertwine his fingers with my good hand "—to be a secret."

"I don't think my answer will help you."

"Why?"

"I didn't really have a choice on the *everyone* knowing part. It kind of happened *to* me."

Clay narrowed his eyes, a line forming between his dark brows. "What do you mean?"

"It's a long, terrible story." He watched me, waiting. I scrunched up my face. "You really want to know? Because it was bad. And it's totally going

to kill the mood."

"I want to know," he said.

He quickly added, "If you feel like telling me."

"Okay."

We went over to sit on the patio steps. He winced as he lowered himself to sit with one leg tucked under the other, facing me.

"Remember that girl Whitley from the party last weekend?"

"The bitch in the red dress... at the party where you hooked up with your ex-boyfriend, the thought of which made me violently ill for a week?"

"Um, yeah. Her." I chose not to comment on the rest. "Well, when she and I were freshmen, she was kind of part of my friend group."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah," I said. "Well, I had already been out to Carrie and my family for about a year, and I felt like I was comfortable enough with my other friends to let them know, so one night when we were hanging out in the parking lot at the grocery store—"

He interrupted me, blurting, "The really dark one on Maple?"

"Yes!" I shouldn't be surprised that he knew it. Whenever we went, there were always Huntington High kids hanging out there. But we never mingled.

Except for once, which was how Carrie met Jackson. She broke the heel of her brand new shoe in a drainage grate and screamed bloody murder. Jackson came running up to offer help, assuming someone had gotten maimed. With the amount of crying Carrie was doing, he immediately identified her as the injured party. She was clutching her shoe like it was a beloved pet who'd just gotten hit by a car. As soon as he saw that she wasn't in pain, he bent down, scooped her up, and carried her, *An Officer and a*

Gentleman style, setting her down on someone's open tailgate in the Huntington group. He offered her a beer and told her he'd carry her around all night if she needed him to. And true love blossomed as private school kids mingled with public school kids in a Winn Dixie parking lot.

"I thought only us public school miscreants did that." Clay nudged my shoulder.

"Nope. The bougie kids did it too. At least the underclassmen. Er... the ones I hung out with anyway."

"So you told them?"

"I did. And they all seemed cool with it. Even Whitley."

"Was she faking it?"

"I honestly don't know. I never got to ask. We weren't friends for very long afterwards. But she isn't the reason I got outed. Just sort of the inciting incident."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she told her brother about it. His name is Patrick. He was a senior then, and so gorgeous with this thick dark hair and the same crystal blue eyes as Whitley. He looked like an angel."

That line from "Blank Space" used to always remind me of him: "'Cause, darling, I'm a nightmare, dressed like a daydream." It took months before I could hear it without thinking of him.

"I have a feeling he wasn't," Clay guessed.

"No. He wasn't," I said unequivocally. Unless we were counting Lucifer.
"But I didn't know that."

I took a deep breath. "I can still remember everything about the day he approached me. I was in the library, and he followed me into the upstairs stacks. He cornered me in a dead end aisle, walking up until he had me pressed against the back wall between Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf. He said Whitley told him about me, and he thought he was also gay, but he was too afraid to tell anyone. He said, 'You're so much braver than me.' And he tucked my hair behind my ear, back when it was long enough to do that. That was the first time I had ever had contact with a guy in that context.

"I nearly fainted when Patrick leaned in close. I thought he would kiss me, but he swerved to put his lips close to my ear. He told me he wanted to meet somewhere outside school to talk. I gave him my number, and he texted later to meet him at the golf course at midnight. Their house backs up to the ninth hole."

"I assume you went," Clay said.

"I did. It was pitch black out there. The only lights came from the houses in the distance. I could barely even see my hand in front of my face. Then I heard Patrick whisper my name. When I turned around, I could see his silhouette walking toward me." I gripped Clay's hand tighter as I felt the threat of tears fast approaching. My whole body shivered, like it did that night. "My heart was beating so fast. I was excited and a little bit scared. The only person I had ever kissed was Carrie, and you know how that ended." I forced a laugh that I didn't feel, and he offered a kind smile.

"It took me too long to notice that he wasn't alone. There was someone following him. More than one. Patrick brought five of his friends. That's six seniors, all of them much bigger and stronger than skinny, little, fourteen-year-old, freshman me."

Clay wiped his thumb under my eye. It came away wet. "You don't have to keep going. I can guess what happened."

I shook my head. I needed to say it. I needed to speak the words out of my mind so they didn't get lodged there and replay on a loop. "After the first punch, I was on the ground, crying. They kicked me in the stomach and the back. Someone hit me in the face with something solid. A stick or a club, I

still have no idea what it was. Patrick had a pretty tight-knit group of friends, so I pretty much knew who all five of the guys beating me were."

"That's awful."

"It gets worse," I said, blinking back tears. "Patrick, ever the charmer, knelt down by my head and gently rolled me onto my back. He tucked my hair behind my ear like he did before and stroked his finger across my lips. I was crying and struggling to breathe. One of my eyes was swelling to the point I could barely keep it open. And he leaned in really close and said, 'Next time you'll think twice about being so proud that you're a freak.' Then he tapped his hand against my cheek and backed off. I thought he was leaving. I prayed they would all go. But then, just for good measure, Patrick, the star of the soccer team—" my voice sounded so bitter, even after all this time "—kicked me so hard in my side that it cracked one of my ribs. The other boys all started laughing when I screamed."

I clenched my jaw and spoke through gritted teeth. "The pain was so bad my stomach convulsed. I turned over and vomited everywhere, which only made it worse. That's when they ran off, still laughing like it was just a cute little prank."

"That's disgusting." Clay looked revolted, the muscles in his jaw tightening as he clenched his teeth. "How can anyone do something like that?"

"It could've been worse."

"How?"

"They could've outright murdered me. Or beat me so bad that I died from my injuries before I got found. It took me like ten minutes to think to call the cops. I was in so much pain, I couldn't even tell them where to find me."

Tears glistened in Clay's eyes as he enveloped me in a tight embrace, holding my head to his shoulder. "I'm sorry that happened to you."

"It is what it is."

Clay pulled back, his hands cradled my face. "What it is, is a big fucking deal. I hope all those bastards are in prison."

"Ha!" I wasn't laughing. I was just exasperated. "Yeah. Patrick got arrested because I actually had the text from him telling me where to meet him. But I didn't have proof about the others. It was just an assumption on my part, because there were five of them and he had five close friends."

"That seems pretty rock-solid to me."

"You're not a cop."

"At least Patrick is in jail."

"Are you kidding?" I actually laughed at that. "Patrick was a rich, straight, white athlete in Alabama. I could've had video of him doing it and he would've gotten off. He got a plea deal and got fucking community service, and he had to attend mandatory anger management and tolerance seminars for six months."

"I'd say I'm surprised, but I'm really not." Clay shook his head, looking as tired of the world's bullshit as I was.

"The only bright side is that he got expelled, because technically he was guilty, and my mother threatened to sue the school if they didn't kick him out. Whitley hated me after that. Said I ruined her brother's life."

"I knew I totally should have keyed her car at the party. We could totally go do it right now. I'd risk more punishment to give you vindication."

I rested my cast on his shoulder. " *Anyway* , the attack was in the news and they so brilliantly announced it as 'a homophobic hate crime against a local high school boy tonight at nine.' They even said my school's name in the story. And I show up two days later with a busted face. They all put two and two together. Hence, it wasn't my choice to come out. So I just didn't bother

trying to hide it anymore. I got called names, but people called me gay before I came out, so it wasn't anything new."

"I get why you said you don't like the people at your school."

"No, they're mostly fine." I brushed the hair off his forehead, just taking in the sight of him. His brown eyes and his freckled cheeks, and those thick dark eyelashes. "All that died down at the end of the year when Patrick's friends graduated."

"I can't believe you ever wanted to try with a guy after that. Especially someone who's in the closet."

"I think you'll find many queer teenagers in the Bible Belt are in the closet if they have a choice. I applaud anyone who has the courage to deal with the hatred and bigotry head on."

"That's so sad." I could see the wheels turning in his head, wishing he could change it. The despair, knowing he couldn't.

"It took a long time for me to stop seeing every guy who flirted with me as a potential threat." I tilted my head, squinting one eye, thinking back. "Let's see, that happened in November, and the next guy I tried anything with was the following summer." I counted on my fingers, whispering the names of the months until I got to June. "So like seven-ish, maybe eight months later."

"Was that Duke?"

"No. I met Alfie in January of tenth grade. This was a boy in Baltimore. I went to stay with my dad for a month and he lived in the same apartment building. He was like a year older, I think. I only even dared to try with him because he was like very audaciously out. Even my dad noticed, and he's so oblivious to that kind of thing."

"Like David Rose level out."

"Totally!" I playfully slapped his chest. "He was so a David. And a little bit Moira. He had a thing for wigs."

"That's amazing."

"We made out a lot while I was there and eventually did some other stuff."

"I thought Alfie was your first." It was so weird to hear Clay call him that.

"Alfie was my first time actually having sex. And my first boyfriend. Me and that other guy were very casual. We mostly got high and kissed a lot. He's the one who introduced me to the devil's lettuce." I mimed smoking a joint. I thought it was funny, but Clay barely lifted the corner of his mouth. "We also put on his wigs and danced around his room in our underwear a lot. That was fun."

Clay shook his head mystified. "That does not sound like you."

"I'm not as much myself around here. Even though people know, it's easier to just go with the flow and stay under the radar."

"Two weeks ago you wore a shirt with the Disney princes standing in front of a rainbow with the words 'Someday My Prince Will Come' printed on it."

"Carrie made me that." I smiled from ear to ear. "I can't believe you remember what I was wearing two weeks ago."

"Everything about you is kind of indelibly marked on my brain." He tapped the side of his head, grinning.

That got my cheeks burning. I laid my cast on top of his hand that held mine, which he never let go of, even though it was grossly sweaty. "Going back to your original question, I guess there are two answers, at least that I can come up with. You're either ready when you feel like you're confident in yourself and you don't care what other people think. Or you do it because the burden of the secret is too much to carry, and not doing it would cause you more harm."

"I've definitely felt the second one."

"You don't have to come out for me, if you're worried about that. I'd never push you to do that. This is your thing that only you can know when you're ready for."

He leaned over to kiss me, softly, sweetly. "Thank you. I don't know that I'm ready, but I also don't want to not be able to hold your hand or hug you when we go places. We already did that for months. It wasn't fun."

"Yeah, but now we can make up for not doing that stuff in public by doing a ton of it in private. We'll be so sick of making out that you won't even want to *look* at me in public."

His grin crinkled the corners of his eyes, just like that photo of his dad he showed me. "I doubt I could ever get sick of making out with you. It kills me that we have to do it this way."

I lifted my cast and wrapped my fingers around his wrist as best I could, twisting it to see the face of his watch. "Well, if we don't get home soon, our parents are the ones who'll be doing the killing."

He looked down. "Shit! You're right."

Reluctantly, I pulled my good hand out of his and fished my phone from my pocket to text Carrie to pick me up.

With a lot of effort, a hand from me, and some grunting, Clay got to his feet. "You're still coming over later, right?"

"As long as I get home in like the next two minutes to call my mom."

"Then you better be getting those chicken legs running."

I scoffed, highly offended. "I do not have chicken legs!"

"Okay... but ya do." Clay wrapped his arm around me, pulling me in. "And I love your skinny legs, and you're knobby knees, and your bony ankles."

"Shut up." I pushed on him, but I put no force behind it, because I didn't actually want him to go anywhere. "I hate you."

Clay's lips split apart into a grin, showing his stupid perfect teeth. "Well, since apparently it's Opposite Day, I hate you too. I've never hated anyone more in my entire life. I bet I even hate you more than you hate me."

"Not possible."

"So very possible."

This time I kissed him, slipping my arms around his neck, really getting into it until Carrie texted that she'd arrived.

Chapter 51 - How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You)

- *Clay* -

I raised my wrist to check the screen on my smart watch for the third time, frowning at the time. Two minutes later than the last time I checked. I also had a text from my mom asking if I was on my way home yet. Since she and Dad both had to work, she asked if Jackson could drop me off home. He did. Just not at *my* home.

I chewed on my fingernail, wondering where Emmett could be. If he didn't hurry, we wouldn't get to see each other before I had to go.

This was the fourth time we'd met up at this empty house to get a few minutes to ourselves. I had to give it to Carrie. This was brilliant. It was the perfect hideaway for a brief encounter— *brief* being the operative word.

A small, yappy dog barked at the next house over, hidden on the other side of the privacy fence that surrounded the backyard.

Someone grabbed my shoulder from behind and spun me around. Emmett smashed his lips against mine, pushing me until he had me pinned against the brick wall. Emmett hooked his injured arm around my neck. His other hand held my face. My hands gripped Emmett's hips, drifting down to his butt.

We had to take our moments when we could get them, since someone was always in the room with us at either of our houses. We could never have a moment to enjoy each other. These stolen kisses were the best it got. At least when my parents asked Rachel to babysit us, she would turn her back and put in headphones so we could make out, pretending to watch movies we'd already seen. Just in case my parents asked what the movie was about. Which they had a couple times.

I imagined this must be how people felt a hundred years ago when all dates required a chaperone. Or, more aptly, when homosexuality was illegal.

It was doubly frustrating because I now had the freedom to live out all those weeks of fantasies now that Emmett was my boyfriend. I didn't have to hide that stuff from him for fear of losing him. In fact, I whispered them to him, running my fingers through his hair while he kissed my neck. He grunted in the most satisfying way, grinding a bit harder against my hips, getting us both worked up. I just wanted to find some secluded spot and bring those whispered words to life. Especially when Emmett's hand slipped beneath my shirt, sliding up my abdomen.

When my watch beeped, I whimpered, pressing my forehead to Emmett's temple. "We should probably get home before they send out a search party."

Emmett pulled back and nodded. His hair was a mess from all of my grabbing at it. I thought it was adorable, but I fixed it back into his artful messy style.

Emmett gave me a brief, gentle kiss. "Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say goodnight till it be morrow."

I repaid Emmett's kiss with another. "You and your references. You really need to give me a syllabus, or a reading list, so I can understand you."

"It's *Romeo and Juliet*," Emmett said, kissing me again quickly. "I thought you'd read it."

"How many times do I have to remind you I blocked out all that shit? I just remember thinking they were both so dumb. I got annoyed. Especially when my girlfriend at the time told me how romantic it was."

"It's kinda the whole point of the play that they're dumb. They're just kids that fall in love and have to deal with a lot of hatred surrounding them, so they do dumb stuff. It's not actually a love story. It's literally labeled a tragedy. I literally cringe every time I hear someone compare their love to *Romeo and Juliet*."

"Whatever you say, Professor Noble."

"I like the sound of that," he said, stroking his knuckles across my cheek. "I could see myself being a teacher someday. Definitely English. Or some advanced literature course. I could have a classroom full of kids to talk about my thoughts on all my favorite classic books, get them into reading and loving books the way no one did for you."

My hands drifted up Emmett's sides, over the curve of his hips, the smooth stretch of his torso that met the firmness of his ribs, around to the sharp peaks of his shoulder blades. "And they would have to listen to you, because you hold their futures in your hand. You can go on and on and on about all those old books. And teach them about all the gay in *Gatsby*. And how dumb *Romeo and Juliet* are."

"*Romeo and Juliet* are hardly alone in that. You and I were pretty dumb for a while," Emmett said, briefly lost in thought. Probably recalling all the unnecessary harm we'd put ourselves—and each other—through. "Both of us tried to maintain a friendship, even though we both wanted it to be more."

"Fair point. I'm just not a Shakespeare guy."

Emmett clutched at his chest with an exaggerated gasp. "That truly wounds me to my soul."

I hooked my arms around Emmett's neck, drawing him in against me. I loved the feel of his chest against mine, his hands feeling me up. "Is that a deal-breaker for you?"

"I could be convinced to forget it."

"Oh, yeah?" I asked, smirking.

"Persuade me."

I pulled Emmett into a long, slow kiss, his lips sliding gently against mine, his tongue slipping through my lips, past my teeth to stroke mine. So I

might be a few minutes late. A kiss like that was worth the lecture I would no doubt receive later.

"Emmett!" Carrie screeched.

Startled, my shoulders slammed against the wall, sending a shooting pain through my side. We both looked over to find her wearing a harsh sneer. She threw her arm out to the side, stabbing her finger in the direction of the gate. "Get your bitch ass moving."

"You said five minutes."

"I gave you *ten* ." She threw up all her fingers.

"It's okay." I kissed Emmett's cheek. "I'll see you at your house in an hour?"

He nodded, giving me one last peck on the lips before pulling away. "Bye, love."

"Bye." I chewed on my thumbnail, grinning.

Carrie gripped his shoulder, shoving him forward as they headed around the house. "I told you, you didn't time for that today."

"Sorry," Emmett said, not sounding sorry in the least. Especially when he laughed. "He's hard to resist."

My grin got even larger. I suspected he felt that way, but it was always nice to hear.

Chapter 52 - I Want to Break Free

- Clay -

The next two weeks dragged by at an agonizing pace, seemingly designed to torture me to the point of madness. My time with Emmett never seemed to be enough. Our secret trysts at the empty house were sadly short-lived. The house sold after only a week of us meeting there. I instantly disliked the couple who moved in. Not because they were bad people—I hadn't even met them. They just ruined the only alone time I got with Emmett, just as I had worked up the nerve to ask him if he wanted to move beyond kissing.

After my week of atonement ended, I was at least able to text him again. We spent hours every night exchanging messages until we fell asleep. A few days after this started, I grew bold and sent a shirtless selfie.

EMMETT: *Is that what we're doing?*

I regretted the decision.

CLAY: *Was that weird? I thought you'd like it. Sorry. I've never done anything like this before.*

A moment later, I got a similar picture of Emmett. Though he had gone a step further and was only wearing his boxer-briefs. The effect on me was immediate. I felt a shiver all over and chewed on bottom lip.

EMMETT: *Does that answer your question?*

We switched from texts to DMs as we sent photos back and forth, each time escalating a bit until we had both seen all of each other.

CLAY: *God I wish I was there right now!!!*

EMMETT: *Why?*

I could practically hear the flirty, teasing tone Emmett would have used to say that.

CLAY: *I think you know why.*

EMMETT: *Nope. You're going to have to tell me.*

CLAY: *If I was there, I'd kiss you.*

EMMETT: *What else?*

CLAY: *I'd touch you.*

EMMETT: *Be more specific.*

The phrase "hot under the collar" popped into my mind to describe how I felt typing out all the things I wanted to do with Emmett. Although I was naked, so I didn't know if the phrase still applied. My heart raced as I read over Emmett's replies, his ideas. I didn't know it was possible to have a full body blush, but that's how I felt when Emmett told me what he was currently doing, thinking about me. It seemed only polite to let him know I was doing the same thing.

Needless to say, it was a very good night.

And now Emmett was free. My parents still hadn't budged on the idea of not returning my car, no matter how much I begged. It hurt to see it sitting in the garage collecting dust. I assumed they'd give it to Rachel when she turned sixteen in April.

My heart pounded as I waited at Emmett's front door. I wiped my clammy palms on my jeans. It was like the first day I came here all over again. Only I didn't know how much I actually liked Emmett that day.

I heard footsteps coming down the stairs inside. The door opened on Mrs. Noble. "He's in his room."

"And I can go up?" I was hesitant because I hadn't been allowed beyond the living room in three weeks.

"Yes, Clay." Mrs. Noble stepped aside and raised her hand toward the stairs. "Will you tell him I'm going to the grocery store? And text me if he wants anything special."

"Sure." I grinned and ran past her, fleeing up the stairs before she decided Emmett needed another day of penance.

I twisted the doorknob as carefully as I could. I wanted to surprise Emmett.

As it turned out, it didn't matter. Emmett was wearing his noise-canceling headphones. He sat at his desk doing homework, his head bobbing to the rhythm. Only Emmett would spend a Friday afternoon doing homework. His extreme nerdiness brought a smile to my face.

I closed the door and crept over to press my lips to Emmett's neck. He nearly fell out of his chair from shock. "What the fuck?" He spun in the chair to look at me, clutching at his chest. "Don't do that!"

I laughed and laid my hands on Emmett's shoulders to keep my balance as I straddled his lap. I removed his headphones, gently placing them on the desk. "I couldn't help myself. You're just so damn sexy."

Emmett rested his hands on my thighs. "How can I be mad then?"

I shook my head, slowly leaning in. "You really can't."

I kissed him, lifting my hands to hold his face as the kiss deepened. A desperate fire spread through my body. Kisses were great, but I craved more.

I pulled away to catch my breath. "We should go on a date."

Emmett raised his brows, his lips stretched into a grin. His green eyes sparkled with delight. "Are you asking me out?"

"If I did, would you say yes?"

"You have to ask me to find out," Emmett teased, bumping the end of his nose against mine.

"Emmett Noble, will you go out with me on a proper date?"

"I'd love to, Clay Lennox-Miller."

"Somewhere fancy. With like reservations and shit."

"You're *such* a romantic, baby," Emmett quipped sarcastically.

I rubbed Emmett's cheek. "I just want to see my baby all dressed up. I bet you're so hot." I leaned in to give him a quick peck on the lips.

"Am I not always hot?"

I hung my arms around Emmett's neck. "Of course you are. But I think I like a man in a suit."

Emmet cracked a smile. "Really? Have you been looking up some *special* videos?"

"No—well, yes, but not that." I shook my head, slightly jarred. "The day of the accident, when I saw you in your uniform for the first time, with your blazer and your tie, I got seriously turned on."

"That's not the first time you saw me in my uniform. Is it?"

I nodded. "The closest I ever get is like this." I tugged on the collar of Emmett's white button-down shirt. "You're always practically out of it before I see you."

"I mean, if it really turns you on, I could put my coat and tie back on right now."

I narrowed my eyes, rubbing Emmett's chest. "Don't tempt me. I might not be able to control myself."

Emmett's good arm slipped around my waist, yanking me higher on his lap. "I'm okay with that."

I could feel just how okay he was. It was impossible to ignore while sitting on his lap. I chewed on my lip, contemplating trying something.

Emmett loosened his grip, leaving me disappointed. "We haven't really talked about this yet. Maybe now's the time."

"You mean sex, right?"

Emmett nodded.

"I'm not a virgin, Em. You know that. And I know you're not."

"But you've never been with a guy before."

"I know the basics," I said, massaging Emmett's shoulders. "I've actually been kinda studying since we got together. For when it happens. I figured I should know what appeals to me and what doesn't." I leaned in, brushing my lips across his as I spoke softly, trying to be seductive. "And you can let me know what you like, and I'll definitely try it. I have a list."

"You have a list?" Emmett asked, chuckling.

I pulled back, feeling awkward now. "I mean I didn't write it down or anything." I threw my head back, groaning. "God, can you imagine if my parents stumbled across something like that?" I shuddered at the thought.

"Well, we don't have to do anything you're not ready for."

I leaned my forehead against his. "And if I said I am ready, what would you think about that?"

"I'd be pleased," he said.

I reached up to unbutton the top of Emmett's shirt. "Oops." I undid a few more. "I'm just so clumsy."

Emmett pressed his lips tightly, trying to hide a smile. "How tragic?"

I slid my hand into the open space in Emmett's shirt, rubbing the skin underneath, getting quite excited myself. I slid my hand up to his shoulder, pushing the cloth aside to press my lips against his collarbone. Meanwhile, I twisted my hips against Emmett.

"Are we actually doing this right now?" Emmett asked.

I brushed my lips across his cheek and along his jawline. "Not everything. Not yet."

"My mom is downstairs."

"No, she's not." I relayed Mrs. Noble's message while nuzzling his neck.

"It usually takes her at least an hour."

"Good." I stared into Emmett's eyes. My hand slid down Emmett's abdomen, drifting down between his legs. "Is this okay?"

"Yeah."

Emmett's lips parted as I palmed the front of his pants. Emmett started panting as I massaged him through the material. I pressed my lips to his, giving him deep, sloppy kisses. A few minutes later, his whole body began trembling.

I smiled against Emmett's lips as his fingers dug deep into my thigh. His breath came out as sharp gusts through his nose. He turned his head away from mine. He grabbed me by the back of neck with his good hand, pulling me close to bury his face in the crook of my neck as he finished.

I stood up and kissed him. "How was that?"

Emmett was still breathing hard. "For someone who's never done anything with a guy, you did that very well."

"Maybe next time we can try it without the clothes."

Emmett hooked his index finger in the waistband of my shorts, drawing me closer. He started rubbing the front of my shorts, though I was already raring to go from what I'd just done.

Emmett unbuttoned my shorts and looked up at me. "Do you want me to keep going?"

I nodded without a word. I had never wanted anything more.

When Emmett unzipped my shorts, they fell to my feet with the weight of my wallet, keys, and phone. My chest heaved as Emmett pushed up my shirt to kiss the spot between my bellybutton and the waistband of my boxers. Emmett's lips followed the thin trail of dark hair down until he reached the fabric. He pulled it down, looking up into my eyes as I was exposed in front of him. He seemed to be checking in on me, possibly to make sure I was alright. When I didn't speak, he continued.

I let out a loud gasp. It's not like it was the first time I'd gotten a blowjob, but the fact that it was Emmett made it a million times better. I twisted my fingers into his thick, black hair. I accidentally yanked a bit too hard and Emmett pulled back. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Keep going."

Emmett smiled, keeping eye contact as he continued.

I gripped Emmett's shoulders tight as my abdomen seized up. "Emmett!"

He must have realized how close I was, because he removed his mouth and stood up to kiss me, wrapping his injured arm around my back to hold me close as he finished the job with his hand.

I wrapped my arms around Emmett, kissing him deeply.

When we parted, Emmett smiled at me. A genuine, wide smile. "I can't tell you how long I've been waiting to do that."

I leaned my forehead against his, both of us breathing heavily. "Probably about as long as I've wanted you to."

"I really need a shower now. You kinda ruined my pants. *Twice* ."

I looked down to see the result of Emmett's handiwork. "I'll take full credit for the first time. The second one is your fault. You shouldn't have held me up against you."

"Better my pants than my rug."

I laughed, pulling my clothes up. "True."

"Do you want to join me in the shower?" He bit his lip, quirking his brow.

I shook my head. "As tempting as that sounds. I have to go. I've got lots of plans to make for tonight."

"You're leaving already? You just got here."

I hooked my arms around Emmett's neck and kissed him again. "Like I said, I got plans to make, baby. I gotta make sure everything's perfect for you."

Emmett grabbed my neck, pulling me into an intense kiss for a moment. "I love you."

"I love you, too." I gave him one last peck on the lips. "Until tonight."

"I can't wait." Emmett said before I swept out of the room.

I couldn't believe that just happened. It gave me an incredible rush, like adrenaline on steroids. That felt more intimate and intense than anything I had ever done with a girl. And I couldn't wait to do it all again.

Chapter 53 - Please, Please, Please Let Me Get What I Want

- *Clay* -

"Please!" I dropped to my knees in front of my parents, clasping my hands together.

"Stop being dramatic." Mom said, readjusting herself on the couch. She reached into the bowl of popcorn Dad held, tossing a few pieces into her mouth.

"I'll do anything." I said, moving to sit on the ottoman for the overstuffed chair.

Dad shook his head. "You're not getting the car back."

"Just for this one night. I'm taking Emmett on our first official date, and I want it to be special."

My parents shared a look. They'd gone out of their way to show support for my relationship with Emmett. Every time he came over, they invited him to stay for dinner. Mom even signed up for the PFLAG newsletter. I kept finding pamphlets around the house about accepting your sexuality, coming out, being a parent to a LGBTQIA+ youth, and how to be an ally. A week ago, I found a printout under my pillow about everything a young gay man should know about having a safe and healthy sex life. I couldn't look at her for two days after that. When I caught her shopping for Pride flags online, I put the kibosh on that, reminding her I wasn't fully out. People would be suspicious if we suddenly started flying a rainbow flag out front.

"What do you think?" Mom asked her husband.

"What if I prove I'm responsible?" I offered.

"How?" Dad sat forward, intrigued.

"What if I got a job? You can stop giving me an allowance. I'll even start paying rent if you want."

I could tell by their reactions that last part had been a step too far into drama queen territory, but I was desperate.

My parents looked at each other again. She raised her brows a fraction. He tilted his head. She pursed her lips. He shrugged. They had a whole conversation, barely saying a word.

Mom turned to me. "You can have the car back. For good."

"For real?" That shocked me. I was talking about one night. I never expected to get it back permanently.

She nodded. "But if you don't take this seriously, or you start slacking off in school, the car is getting sold."

I jumped up and rushed over to hug them both in turn. "I love y'all so much."

"Hold on," Dad said. "I'd rather you find a volunteer position, though, and we'll continue your allowance. I don't want you taking a job from someone who actually needs it."

"Totally. I'll start looking first thing in the morning."

I jumped up, ready to flee, but Mom grabbed my wrist. "I have another stipulation."

I worried what more she could ask for. "What? Do you need a kidney?"

My mother grimaced at me. "I want you to see a new therapist."

"Why?"

"You've been going through a lot of big changes lately, and that can trigger your anxiety."

"Things are good now. Emmett and I are together, and you guys know. It's all okay."

She shook her head. "This is nonnegotiable."

"Fine," I muttered.

"Good. Because you have an appointment Wednesday after school."

My mouth fell open. So, I had no choice one way or the other. "Are you serious?"

"Yep. I got his name from one of the ladies in my Southern Mothers of LGBTQ+ Teens Facebook group."

"We just had this discussion about that stupid flag. You can't join groups like that. I'm not ready for people to know."

"It's a private group. Only the other members know I'm in it, and you can only get in by invite."

"Who invited you?" Dad asked, with a nonchalant curiosity, crunching on a handful of popcorn.

"Barbara Noble."

I groaned. "Whatever."

I fled to my room before they could rethink their decision—or add more conditions—and started my search for a decent restaurant for tonight. I could find a job tomorrow. This was a bit more pressing.

About an hour later, with my plans all set, Emmett sent a photo of an outfit laid out on his bed—dark gray trousers, a black dress shirt and a blue blazer with a splattered paint print. I could never pull off a look like that. Nor would I ever dream of trying.

EMMETT: *I know you said fancy, but is this too much?*

I chewed on my lip, picturing Emmett in the ensemble.

CLAY: *You're gonna be so hot in that .*

EMMETT: ☹️

I frowned, looking over his outfit again. I had nothing to compare to that. I had planned to wear a nice shirt and a tie with the slacks I got for my cousin's wedding last year.

"Hey, Mom!" I jumped off the bed and jogged into the living room. My parents still sat on the sofa, cuddled up.

"Mom," I repeated.

She paused their movie and looked up. "Yeah, sweetheart?"

"I need to go shopping."

"Okay," she said, absentmindedly. "I'll take you tomorrow. We'll make a day of it."

I shook my head. "I need to go *right now* . I need something to wear for my date." I pulled up the image Emmett sent and showed her. "I can't be so basic with him wearing this."

"I've got plenty of sport coats if you want to borrow one."

I suspected Dad's coats would be too big on me. I was much thinner than him. But I didn't want to hurt his feelings, so I said, "I want something special that'll really wow him."

It wasn't a lie. I wanted to impress Emmett. I'd never given much thought to what I would wear on a daily basis, but since getting into a relationship with Emmett, I found myself wanting to always look good for him. To make him take notice of me.

Mom groaned as she stood up, stretching her arms out wide, rolling her neck. "Alright." She pulled the band out of her sandy hair, slipping it over her wrist before she shook her hand through her hair.

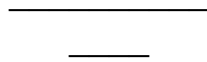
I ran back to my room and opened the lockbox coin bank on my desk, pulling out all the extra allowance and birthday money I had saved up. Determined to find something great. I didn't care about the cost. Emmett was worth it.

When I returned to the living room, Rachel came loping down the stairs. "Where are you going?" she asked, seeing our mom with her purse hanging on her arm.

Mom explained what was going on.

"I want to come. Give me two seconds." Rachel turned and raced back upstairs.

"Hurry up!" I yelled after her. "I only have a couple hours to do this."



We ended up at the strip mall on the posh side of town. It had a giant fountain in the center of the roundabout at the entrance. Sculpted shrubbery and an array of multicolored flowers lined the pristine sidewalks. Beneath the covered walkway, each store had a fancy placard hanging above the entrance.

In the first store, I felt very out of place in my jogging shorts and t-shirt. My mother and Rachel didn't seem concerned. They chatted about what colors looked best on me. Not bothering to ask my opinion.

"He can't clash, though," Rachel said when Mom suggested a red shirt.

Mom nodded. "Good point. Let's stick to cooler colors." She pointed to a rack of gray shirts.

I wandered around, brushing my fingertips along the luxurious materials.

"Ew! No paisley," Rachel said, too loudly, from the other side of the store.

I stumbled upon a section of printed suit jackets. I suspected Emmett would like these. I couldn't pull off the more audacious prints, like the one on Emmett's blazer, but I kind of liked the simple ones. I flipped through a rack of gray coats with pale pinstripe lines that intersected to make a basic check pattern. It was subtle from afar, but interesting up close.

A beautiful twenty-something blonde woman appeared on the other side of the rack, boasting a gold-plated name tag declaring her Alessandra, Assistant Manager. She wore her hair in a severe bun that probably caused her headaches.

"Can I help you?" She sounded pleasant, offering a smile.

"I don't know my size," I said, pointing to the jackets.

"We can fix that." She produced a roll of measuring tape from the pocket of her black blazer. She gave me instructions on how to stretch my arms and how to stand to get the proper measurements of my chest and waist. "Trust me, you don't want to suck in on this part. You'll end up with a jacket that's too tight and you might pop a button."

I laughed as she moved over to search the jackets for my size. "So, is this a special occasion?"

"It's a first date," I said.

"Fancy first date."

"He's worth it." I hadn't meant to say that out loud. My eyes jumped up to Alessandra's face, searching for any sign of distaste. She was more concerned with finding the jacket. Her dark berry red lips pursed in concentration.

She removed a jacket from the hanger and held it up for me. "Try this."

I slipped my arms through the sleeves. The lining was silky and cool against my skin. She brushed the shoulders down and tugged on the back. She

moved around to button the front. "How does that feel?"

I twisted, taking a few deep breaths to make sure it wasn't too tight. "It's nice. The arms are kinda long though." I raised my arm to show the sleeves hanging past my wrist. I wondered if I had short arms, or if they made the sleeves too long on purpose so they could force people to get alterations so it fit properly.

She nodded. "That's an easy fix."

I walked over to a corner with a three-way mirror to check the look. I liked it. "It's for tonight."

"We have one-hour alterations for an additional fee."

I huffed smugly. Of course, it was on purpose. Why pass up any chance to bilk some rich folks out of a few extra bucks?

"How much?" I asked.

"Since it looks like it's just the sleeves, it shouldn't be more than fifty."

Mirror Clay's eyes bugged out. "Dollars?"

She seemed amused. "Of course."

"And how much is the jacket?"

She walked over to check the price on one of the identical coats on the rack. "Oh, it's on sale! Only one-twenty-five." She acted like that was a humongous bargain.

Only one hundred and twenty-five dollars. *What a steal*, I thought bitterly. I couldn't afford the jacket and the tailoring. I had just shy of \$150 from my lockbox, unless I dipped into the money I'd already set aside for the date, which I refused to do. I'd rather borrow an ill-fitting coat from Dad than buy something expensive and have to cheap out on Emmett.

Mom appeared in the mirror behind me. "Honey, that looks great."

"It really does," Rachel added, tilting her head as she looked me over. "I can't believe you picked something that isn't totally boring."

"I'll give you a moment," Alessandra said, stepping away.

Rachel hung an arm over my shoulder, which must have been uncomfortable given how much shorter she was than me. "Maybe being gay really does improve your fashion sense."

I glared at my sister's reflection. Not only was she stereotyping gay people again, she'd just outed me in public—though Alessandra was too far away to hear unless she had the place bugged. If I hadn't already unwittingly done that, I'd be furious with my sister.

I recited the price to my mom and the cost to have it tailored for tonight. "I love it, but I can't afford it."

"I'll cover it," Mom said, brushing her hand over my shoulder as she circled around to stand in front of me, appraising the coat.

"I can't let you do that. You already gave me back my car. It's too much."

"Don't worry about it." She cupped my cheek. "We'll call it an early birthday gift."

"My birthday is over a month from now."

She tapped my cheek before dropping her hand. "That's why I said *early*, smartass."

I removed the jacket and folded it over my arm. I suspected this was another attempt for Mom to prove how much she supported my relationship. Which was fine by me. If she wanted to pay for it, I wasn't about to stop her.

Alessandra returned with a crisp white shirt. "I thought I'd suggest this, if you need a shirt. It's your size."

So that's why she measured my neck. I should've guessed.

"He also needs pants," Mom said.

"This blazer has a matching trouser," Alessandra said.

"Ooh, we'd like to see those," Mom said, taking the shirt.

"We would?" I asked. "Won't that be a bit much to have pants and a jacket in this pattern?"

"I think you can pull it off," Alessandra said, giving me a wink. I knew what she was doing. This wasn't real flirting. She was building up my ego to get me to purchase more so she could get a bigger commission.

Before I could protest, Alessandra flitted away. She returned with the matching trousers in my size. "We also have a vest, if you're interested."

"No!" I said. A suit was already much more than I intended to buy. I wasn't wearing a vest, too.

"Do you have somewhere he can try those on?" Mom asked.

"Of course." Alessandra beckoned me to follow her.

The fitting room wasn't like the ones I was used to, with slatted doors that didn't even reach the floor. It was a full room with a settee and a small table with a lamp and a bowl of overpowering citrus potpourri. A full-length gilt-framed mirror hung on one wall to offer me a look at myself, without having to leave the room. The pants actually fit great, except for the pooling around my feet. I walked out to show them off.

They all complimented me.

"We can have those hemmed when we alter the jacket," Alessandra said.

"That sounds great," Mom said.

While Mom went to pay for everything, a young man—Russell, according to his name tag—came to pin my hem. I tried not to stare at him. He had a boyish look about him, though he was definitely in his twenties. He had

beautiful brown skin and thick, wavy dark hair parted to the side. I had the urge to run my fingers through it. But I refrained. He reminded me so much of someone else, but it wouldn't come to me.

After a few minutes of unabashedly staring at him, the answer finally struck. He reminded me of the boy who was a counselor at the summer camp I attended when I was younger. Jacob. I hadn't thought about him in years. Not since that last summer at camp right before eighth grade started.

I admired Jacob so much. He was the coolest guy I'd ever met. I followed him everywhere all summer. I did whatever I could to spend extra time with him, always volunteering to help with equipment, setting up activities, and cleaning up afterwards. If Jacob ever wanted help motivating the other campers into playing games or doing activities, he would turn to me for help. Every time he praised me, I got a thrill. Jacob's approval meant everything to me.

Near the end of that summer, Jacob started spending all of his time with one of the female counselors, taking away from his time with me. I got so angry after that; I punched one of my bunkmates for something stupid that I couldn't even remember anymore. They banned me from the final week's activities, which were always the most fun part of camp. When Jacob came into the cabin to check on me during the bonfire on the last night, I was so upset I wanted to cry. He tried to get me to talk about it, even suggesting he would hang out with me for a bit. I said something about that girl missing him, then I laid down and turned my back to him. I bawled my eyes out after he left. I never went back to camp. I couldn't face Jacob after being such a brat.

I wondered where I had been storing that memory. I'd always remembered camp, and I knew I had such a miserable time my last summer there that I never wanted to go back, but I somehow repressed the reason.

Back then, I assumed Jacob fascinated me because he was in high school, whereas I had only just finished seventh grade. Thinking about it now, I'm pretty sure I had been in love with him. Or at least the thirteen-year-old boy's version of love, which was basically just infatuation.

I guess Emmett wasn't the first boy I'd ever had a crush on. How could I forget that?

Looking at the tailor, I realized he didn't look that much like Jacob at all. Their faces were totally different, and Jacob always had a shaved head. Jacob's skin was also darker. I didn't know why Russell had brought back that memory. Was it just because I thought he was attractive?

Maybe admitting my feelings for Emmett allowed me to acknowledge my attraction to other guys. Perhaps it triggered that dormant part of my brain that kept Jacob a secret until I was ready to process it.

I was suddenly curious what ever happened to Jacob. Would he remember me if we met again? What would he think if I told him how much he meant to me back then? Would he be flattered or repulsed?

It was questions like that which made me understand why I blocked out that part of myself for so long. Maybe Mom was right. Maybe I did need a therapist.

"This is an awesome suit," Russell said.

"Uh-huh."

When Russell stood up to mark the jacket sleeve length, I got a whiff of his woody cologne. He smelled delicious.

Russell helped me out of the jacket. "And I need the pants. Just be careful of the pins."

I stepped into the dressing room to exchange the pants for my shorts, offering them to him. I hurried out to find my mom and Rachel.

"We'll call when the alterations are finished." Alessandra flashed a brilliant smile. She was probably thinking about the huge commission coming her way.

"Thank you for all your help," Mom said.

"My pleasure." Alessandra turned her eyes to me. "Whoever he is, he's going to love it."

So she definitely heard me earlier. Either that, or my theory about listening devices wasn't so far-fetched.

I smiled. "Thanks."

"What are we going to do for an hour?" Mom asked, checking her watch as we exited the store.

I looked around the plaza at the other shops. Most of them were clothing and jewelry stores, and I already had everything I needed. We certainly didn't need to go shopping for overpriced home decor or furniture.

Rachel tugged on my sleeve. When I looked at her, she casually gestured toward a salon. She whispered, "If you really want to change your hair, now would be a good time to ask, while she's feeling generous."

That day at breakfast after the accident, when I learned I wouldn't be getting my car back, I decided to put off dying my hair. I didn't want to risk losing my visitation time with Emmett for the sake of a few highlights. Maybe now was the time.

"Hey, Mom," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Can I get my hair dyed?"

"Dyed?" Her forehead creased. "What color?"

"I was thinking just maybe some blue highlights."

"Really?" She sounded confused. Probably because I'd never expressed an interest in anything of this sort before.

I nodded. I had an idea to push her over the edge of acceptance. "I'm just trying to express my genuine self. I think this would help." I got that

"genuine self" thing out of one of her pamphlets. It might be a bit manipulative, but I really wanted this. And it was true.

She glanced at Rachel, probably recalling her freak-out over the pink dye job. She sighed. "Do you want to get yours done, too, Bean?"

Rachel's lips spread so wide I could see her molars. "Oh my God! Yes!"

Rachel hugged me as we walked toward the salon. "You being gay is the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Rachel!" Mom scolded.

I just laughed, putting an arm around my sister. It was the best thing that ever happened to me, too.

Chapter 54 - King of My Heart

- *Emmett* -

I gasped when I opened my front door. Clay stood there in an amazing suit with ashy silver hair. "Holy shit!" My mouth fell open. I raised a hand to cover it.

Clay reached up to touch his hair, combed back from his face. "Is it awful? Do you hate it?" He scrunched his face in distress. "I knew I shouldn't have gone with such a drastic change. I was just gonna get a few highlights, but between Rachel and the stylist egging me on, I was all hyped up and I just went with it."

I shook my head, mystified and awed. I didn't think it possible to become any more attracted to him. But, somehow, he'd done it. "It looks awesome."

"Really?" The compliment immediately shifted Clay's demeanor from embarrassed to confident. He straightened his posture. His lips twisted into a sultry smirk. He stepped forward, across the threshold, nudging the door shut. His hand cupped my cheek while he leaned in for a kiss, sucking on my bottom lip.

I broke the kiss before it got too heated, pressing my forehead to his. "I love the suit, too. Very hot." I brushed my fingers over his lapel.

"Back at ya." Clay slipped his arms around my waist.

Mom rounded the corner from the kitchen. Her eyes bugged out at seeing Clay, but she quickly regained her composure. "Don't you both look handsome?" She pulled out her phone and gestures for us to get closer. "Let me get a picture."

Clay and I leaned our heads together, holding each other close. She snapped a few shots, demanding different poses for each angle. I smiled, because I knew Clay would. Also, because for the first time in a long time, I had a

reason to smile. I had a gorgeous boyfriend who loved me and treated me like I was the most important person in the world.

It seemed so strange that Clay and Alfie were such good friends—or had been, once upon a time. They couldn't be more opposite. Especially in their treatment of me. Alfie used me for his own needs, disregarding me whenever he had no use for me. Though, I had to be at his beck and call 24/7, or else he'd freak out on me, acting like I didn't care about him.

Clay, on the other hand, spent weeks pining for me in misery because he thought being my friend was what would make me happiest. We'd since talked about that, both promising we would never bottle up our feelings for the other's sake. It wasn't healthy for us or our relationship for either of us to be miserable. After all, if one of us had confided our feelings sooner, we could have been together ages ago.

"You aren't going to post those pictures anywhere, are you?" Clay asked. Worry lines creased his forehead.

Mom shook her head. "I just thought you boys would like a memento of the evening."

I stroked Clay's face to calm his nerves. He must have shaved right before coming over; his skin was smooth as silk.

"Are you ready?" Clay asked.

"Definitely." I waved goodbye to my mother as Clay opened the front door, allowing me to exit first.

I gasped, my eyes going wide at the sight of the little white Honda sitting at the curb. "You got your car back! How?"

"I had to promise to find a volunteer job to prove that I'm responsible enough to have it." Clay stuffed his hands in his pockets and chuckled. "Honestly, I think they finally just got tired of me begging. And not just me, Rachel has been on them about it, too. She hates having them drive her to school."

"Where are you volunteering? Maybe I can pick up some shifts, too, so we can spend more time together."

Clay shrugged and opened the passenger side door for me. "I'll let you know when I figure it out."

I nodded, getting into the car. I made a mental note to ask my mother if she knew of any openings in the area. She was always hounding me to help at one of the animal shelters who used her as their vet.

Clay shut the door and rushed around the front of the car to climb into the driver's seat. I plugged my phone into the aux cord as I always did. I'd created a special playlist of my favorite love songs to make the night perfect.

After starting the engine, Clay laid his hand down on the center console, awaiting my hand. I obliged, lacing my fingers through his as "You Are In Love" started playing.

At the restaurant, Clay bypassed the clumps of people waiting for a table with buzzers in hand and went straight to the hostess stand. A cute girl in a black cocktail dress greeted us and asked for the name.

"I have a reservation. Under Miller."

The girl's eyes scrolled down her tablet. She nodded, grabbing two menus from beneath her podium. "Right this way."

She took us to a table on the far side of the restaurant in the darkened gallery along the back wall. The pendulum lights hanging above these tables were much dimmer than the rest of the lights, creating a more intimate mood. We sat on opposite sides of the table. The frosted amber glass dividers between each booth made it feel like we were in our own little world.

The hostess placed two leather-bound menu books in front of us with "Stefano's" scrawled across the front. She took away the wine glasses that were part of the place setting. She must've known we weren't of age.

"How did you find this place?" I asked, flipping through the menu.

Clay glanced around at the stucco walls and the small mural painted above our table of an Italian villa—I assumed it was Italy because the restaurant had the words *Italian Steakhouse* written under their name on the sign. "My parents came here for their last anniversary."

"You really didn't have to bring me somewhere this fancy."

"I wanted it to be special. To show how much you mean to me." Clay reached his arm across the table, his hand palm up.

The gesture surprised me. I assumed with Clay being mostly in the closet he'd be averse to PDA. Obviously, the first time we kissed was in the middle of a public park, but I thought that was just a result of being lost in the moment and forgetting where he was.

Regardless, I slipped my hand into his, smiling as he stroked his thumb across my knuckles. "I would've been just as happy at McDonald's, as long as I'm with you."

"I love you," Clay said, beaming.

"I love you, too." My eyes drifted up to Clay's hair when he reached up to self-consciously touch it again. "I also love your hair. I can't believe you did that."

Clay chuckled to himself. "You know, when my mom agreed to let me do it, she let Rachel get hers done, too. She's now blonde with purple highlights, by the way." He shook his head, as if he'd strayed from his point. "Anyway, Rachel actually said me being gay is the best thing that ever happened to her."

That caught me off guard. My head reared back before a smile spread across my face.

"What?" Clay's brows knitted together.

"That's the first time you've said that."

His eyes bounced side to side, still confused. "I don't follow."

I leaned forward over the table. "That you're gay."

A laugh bubbled out of him. He copied my posture, bringing his face closer to mine. "I thought it became fairly obvious when we started making out. And I don't know how you could question it after what happened in your room this afternoon."

"I wasn't really sure if that's how you identify."

"Oh." Clay sat back. He nodded. "Yeah. It is."

"I didn't know. Because you've had girlfriends. I didn't want to assume anything."

"Well, now you know." Clay squeezed my hand and smiled. He leaned forward again, a new sense of excitement on his face. "Actually, speaking of that, the guy who tailored my suit was very hot."

I raised my brows. "Was he now?"

Clay backed away, his smile fading. "Should I not say things like that? Is that weird? I never really had this issue with my girlfriends, since I never looked at other girls."

I placed my other hand on top of his, smiling to ease his nerves. "It's fine, babe. We should be honest. You can look all you want, just no touching."

"Trust me, baby, the only person I want to touch is you." The amorous look Clay gave me was proof enough of that. I pressed my lips tight to hide my growing smile and looked down at the menu.

Noticing the prices, I stared at Clay. "This steak costs forty-five dollars. And that one is sixty!" I whisper-screamed.

"Don't worry about the price," Clay said, the corner of his mouth quirking up. "Get whatever you want. I got it covered."

It was a sweet offer, but I resolved to be a considerate boyfriend. I'd find something on the menu that wouldn't bankrupt him for the sake of one meal.

Chapter 55 - Shiny Happy People

- *Clay* -

With the meal out of the way, the server returned to the table with our chocolate lava cake. "Care to do the honors?" I pushed the tiny pitcher of boiling chocolate toward Emmett.

Emmett grinned, picking up the pitcher by the handle, so small he couldn't even get his whole index finger through it. He poured the sauce over the cake, making the center collapse.

Dinner went great, except for the early hiccup of Emmett trying to order a salad as his entrée.

"He will not be having the salad," I told the waiter. Then I turned to glare at Emmett. "You don't even like salad."

"I'm trying to be healthy," Emmett said, giving a halfhearted shrug.

I snorted in disbelief. "Since when?"

Emmett was by no means unhealthy, but I had yet to see him eat a piece of lettuce that wasn't on top of a hamburger. If I genuinely believed he wanted it, I wouldn't have said a word. I would buy him ten if he asked. But his earlier comment about the price of the steaks had me on high alert. He was sacrificing his satisfaction for my well-being. And he was lying about it. Which we promised we'd never do again.

"Tuesday," Emmett said, not missing a beat.

"I don't believe you."

"I can't help it if you don't accept my lifestyle choices." Emmett flipped his hand nonchalantly. The waiter, however, shifted his weight uncomfortably, staring at his little pad.

I raised my brows. I couldn't believe he was doubling down. "Your lifestyle choice of being a lying bitch?"

Emmett puckered his lips, refusing to meet my eyes, unfazed by the name-calling. The waiter cleared his throat, probably to remind us of his presence.

"Fine." I turned to the server. "Then I'll take a second steak dinner for myself." I glanced at Emmett. "I'm thinking medium for that one."

Emmett sighed, his shoulders slumping, giving up on his unnecessary effort. "Medium-well. But can you do those little crispy potatoes instead of the baked potato?"

The waiter jotted it down on his pad, nodding. "Sure."

"Oh, and nix the salad." Emmett drew a line with his finger across his throat.

"Of course." The waiter flipped his pad closed and set off. I'd bet he was about to tell the kitchen staff about the crazy bickering gay couple.

Emmett finally looked at me, offering a reluctant grin. "I really love you, you know."

Those words gave me tingles every time. "I had a hunch."

"Sorry I lied."

"Sorry I called you a bitch."

Emmett flashed an incredulous smirk. "We both know it's true."

Watching Emmett dig into the cake now, I smiled. This date was worth every penny to make him happy.

Emmett cut a piece of cake with his fork and held it across the table. "You need to eat some of this before I inhale it all."

I leaned forward and ate the bite off his fork. My eyelids fluttered as my hand flew to my mouth. I moaned in the back of my throat. "Oh, God! That's better than sex." I joked.

"You only think that because you haven't had sex with me, yet." Emmett mumbled through a bite of cake, totally casual about it.

Heat blossomed across my face at the thought. I was glad of the dim lighting, although Emmett was too focused on the cake to notice my flushed cheeks.

After finishing dessert, I paid the check, making sure Emmett couldn't see it, though he tried. He also offered to split the bill, but I denied the request. "I asked you out. I'm not letting you pay."

"How very heteronormative of you." Emmett dragged his finger through a puddle of chocolate sauce on the plate and licked it off.

"Don't. This isn't a gay/straight thing. It's a politeness thing." I folded my arms on the table and tilted my head, glaring at him. "If you want to pay, you can ask me out next time."

"Ha!" Emmett shook his head. "If I'm paying, we're definitely ending up at a drive-thru. I'm broke as hell."

I laughed, removing the cloth napkin from my lap, dropping it on the table. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah." Emmett scooted to the edge, waiting until I got up to stand.

Feeling emboldened, I clutched Emmett's hand as we walked out of the restaurant. It made my skin prickle with excitement to freely show my true feelings. I loved this boy more than anyone in the world. I just wanted to scream it out for everyone to hear. I wished I could be this brave all the time. For Emmett's sake, and for my own.

Emmett glanced over with a huge, toothy grin.

At the car, when I opened his door, Emmett brushed his hand over my shoulder. "Would you be okay if I kissed you right now?"

I bit my lip, nodding my head. Emmett clutched my lapel, drawing me in for a brief kiss.

"Tonight was awesome, Clay," Emmett said, once we were both sitting in the car. "Easily the best date I've ever had."

"You mean a lot to me, Em." I laid my hand on his thigh, giving it a squeeze. "Not just because I love you, though I do, immensely. But also because you helped me understand myself better. Before you, I never thought I'd find someone to feel this way about. I wasn't even sure that I could feel these things. I just want you to know that."

"Okay." Emmett waved his hand at his face. "You need to stop right now before I cry."

"Aw, baby." I lifted my hand to his neck, stroking his jawline with my thumb. "Come here."

It started as a hug, then Emmett pulled back to look at me, his lips slightly parted. His gorgeous green eyes, glowing in the dashboard lights, locked onto mine. Then we kissed.

I couldn't imagine a better ending to a perfect night.

But it seemed Emmett had other ideas. "Do you have a fake ID?" he asked.

"Yeah. Why?"

"I want to take you somewhere." Emmett typed something into his phone, then it started announcing directions.

I shrugged and did as I was told. I was happy to spend more time with him. Though I wondered why a fake ID was necessary.

Chapter 56 - Wild Night

- *Clay* -

The GPS led us downtown. We passed by the gas-station-turned-coffee-house, driving by the mural where I took the picture of us that I wanted to set as the wallpaper on my phone, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Not yet.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"You'll see." Emmett said. He looked around. "Turn left here." He pointed to the side of the intersection.

"But the phone didn't say that."

"I know." Emmett said, silencing the GPS as it tried to give conflicting instructions. "It's taking us to the actual building. But we need to park."

I made the turn, following Emmett's directions to a small parking lot that was almost full. I squeezed my car into a space where some asshole had parked his truck slightly over the line. Thankfully, my car was tiny.

As we walked down the empty street, with only a few streetlights to keep us from total darkness, I felt that surge of bravery again. I reached over and took Emmett's hand, threading my fingers through his. He smiled at me.

I was both excited and nervous about where he was taking me.

A couple blocks down, we rounded the corner, suddenly inundated with neon lights that outlined the front of almost every building on this tiny section of street. All of them had names I had never heard. A web of twinkle lights hung above the street, stretched from one roof to the others. I understood why we couldn't go to the building now. Orange traffic cones blocked the end of the street. People hung out right in the middle of the

road. Some of them stumbled around or spoke with loud slurred voices, clearly intoxicated.

Seeing that many people, I instinctively tried to pull my hand free of Emmett's.

Emmett gripped my hand tighter and pulled me to the side, where the street was too dark to see us. "You don't have to worry about that here. None of these people care about us. We don't know them, and they don't know us. They're just here to get drunk, have fun, and maybe get laid."

"Where are we? What is this place?"

"It's Club Row." Emmett said that like I should know. "You've never been here before?"

I looked over at the dazzling lights, noticing that several of the windows had neon signs for specific types of alcohol, mostly beer. "No."

"Then why do you have a fake ID?"

"To buy beer from the gas station. Not to go clubbing."

Emmett stroked my face. "If you don't want to go, we can go somewhere else."

"Why do you even want to go to a club?"

"I love dancing. And I wanted to dance with you."

"In public?" I looked over at all the strangers. With this many people on the street, I could only imagine how many were inside each building.

"Where I want to take you, no one will bat an eye at us. I promise." Emmett held my face between his hands. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course."

"Then will you go with me?"

I took a shaky deep breath, my heart pounding wildly. I nodded.

A huge smile spread over Emmett's face. He pulled me across the crowded street. I kept my head down as I followed a half-step behind, trying to ignore my clammy palms. Emmett didn't seem to mind it. Or maybe he did, and he was just holding on to make a point. Either way, he didn't let go as he led the way to a place called Vibrant.

There was a small line, just three people ahead of us. The bouncer let each one in after he checked their identification. Emmett released my hand to take his wallet out. He pulled a fake ID out from behind his actual driver's license, so I did the same. The bouncer gave a nod and waved us both inside without hassle.

There was a small lobby where we had to walk through a metal detector and pay a cover charge to get through a set of double doors. This time Emmett insisted on paying. I tried to protest, but Emmett raised a cocky brow and said, "I invited *you* here, after all. And that was your stupid rule."

I couldn't argue without being a hypocrite, so I said nothing.

Once we made it through the second door, Emmett immediately took up my hand again. Before I could even think about pulling away, I noticed that the two men walking in ahead of us were also holding hands. Further down, as the light grew dimmer and the music got louder, we passed two men kissing in an offshoot from the hallway.

The corridor opened up on the main room. It was smoky, with strobing lights cutting through the haze. It smelled heavily of alcohol and sweat, and just a little bit of pee.

Emmett hauled me out onto the dance floor, surrounded by men. I only saw a few women in the crowd. I suspected one of them was actually a man in drag, judging by the audacious hairstyle, the prominent Adam's apple, and the thick application of over-the-top campy makeup on their face.

Emmett slipped his arms around my waist, pulling me close.

All of it overwhelmed me. My heart beat so hard it rivaled the thumping bass from the speakers that made the entire building feel like it was vibrating.

Emmett leaned in close, pressing his cheek against mine. "What do you think?" He had to practically scream to be heard.

"I don't know what to think." I looked around at all the men—at least a dozen of them shirtless—freely dancing and kissing without caring who saw them. Because no one here cared that we weren't straight. We could be ourselves without fear or condemnation.

"That's okay." Emmett said. "It took me a little time to get used to it, too."

My lips twisted into a smile. I pulled back from Emmett to look at his beautiful face for a second before pushing forward to kiss him. Not just a peck, either. I kissed him the way my friends would kiss their girlfriends in the school hallways. Because they could. Here, in this amazing place, I could kiss Emmett and finally feel normal.

Chapter 57 - A Place in This World

- *Emmett* -

It didn't take Clay long to get comfortable. After that first kiss, which I felt all the way to my toes, Clay held me and kissed me and danced on me like we were the only people in the room. He was a surprisingly good dancer, and he wasn't shy about trying the same grinding moves as the guys surrounding us.

A few guys on the dance floor checked him out. It wasn't just his suit or his silver hair that made him stand out. He seemed to come alive in this place; his openness made him even more attractive. To me, and to others.

Clay didn't seem to notice the attention he was drawing, or the guys who danced closer to catch his eye. When his eyes were actually open, he only looked at me. He also never took his hands off me. No matter how fast the song, no matter how much the crowd jumped around or jostled us, Clay held me close, occasionally leaning in to kiss me on the lips, or the cheek, or the neck.

After about twenty minutes, I had worked up a sweat and quite a thirst. It was balmy in the club, with so many thrashing bodies on the dance floor. Not to mention the guys getting hot and heavy in the darkest corners of the room.

I left Clay to continue dancing while I went to the bar. "Two bottles of water." I told the hot bartender, wearing a tiny vest without a shirt. I wondered if that was his uniform or if he did that to get more tips.

After a five-minute wait, the guy placed the bottles on the bar and held out a credit card machine for me to swipe my card. I didn't want my mother to see a nightclub on my statement, so I fished out a ten-dollar bill to pay the exorbitant eight dollars for two bottles of water that wouldn't cost even half that at a convenience store. And Dasani no less. They could at least stock

Fiji, or even an Evian. Hell, tap water might even be preferable. I walked away, letting the guy keep the extra two dollars.

Clay rushed up to the table I had claimed. He kissed me on the cheek. "I'm pretty sure I just heard two guys having sex in the bathroom."

"I wouldn't be surprised. That happens at clubs. Even straight ones."

Clay laughed. "Also, the guy in line ahead of me gave me his number." Clay raised his hand to show off the numbers inked on his palm along with the name Chris. He seemed surprised by that. It was like he didn't understand how hot he really was.

I felt a spark of jealousy, but I said nothing. I didn't want to ruin Clay's fun with my insecurities.

"I was so stunned when he offered, I couldn't even speak to tell him I have a boyfriend. I just stood there like an idiot." Clay picked up a cocktail napkin and poured some water on it. He scrubbed the number away, discarding the napkin onto the table.

I was more than a little pleased by that. Alfie probably would've programmed that number into his phone for later use.

Clay took my chin in his hand and turned me to face him, leaning in for a kiss. He wasn't shy about this either.

When Clay pulled back, he smiled at me. "Thank you for bringing me here. For showing me what it can be like not to have to worry about being who I am all the time."

I nodded. "I knew you'd like it."

Clay chugged down half his bottle of water in one go. He blew out a cool breath and kissed me quickly with icy lips. "Now, I need my boyfriend to come dance with me." He took my hands and pulled me to the dance floor.

I laughed and hugged Clay. We got caught up in the music and the crowd, enjoying each other. Clay had such a bright smile the whole time. It also

brought me joy to be the one to introduce him to this new world where he belonged, where he was free. A place where our love was not only acceptable, but celebrated.

Chapter 58 - Feels Like the First Time

- *Clay* -

We stayed at the club for almost two hours. By the time we left, at nearly 1 a.m., the club was beginning to feel more like a sauna. Sweat beaded on both our foreheads, dampening our hair. The collar and underarms of my new shirt showed the signs of a night of grinding on my boyfriend, packed into the throng closer than sardines in a can, but I couldn't find the capacity to care.

The night breeze that should have chilled me straight through had no effect as I held Emmett's hand, gleefully strolling through the shadowy streets of a city where I'd lived my whole life. It felt as if I'd never truly lived at all until tonight. My skin was still buzzing when we got into my car to head toward home. As Emmett's idol said, I was drunk on something stronger than the drinks in the bar.

"I think this was the best night of my life," I said, feeling the ache in my cheeks from so much smiling.

Emmett reached over to play with my hair. "I'm glad you had fun, baby. I just wanted to show you that being gay can be awesome."

At that, I had to laugh. "I know. If I wasn't gay, I wouldn't have you. That's awesome enough, without all the other stuff."

Emmett ran his fingernails across my scalp, sending a wave of delightful chills up my spine. "I love you so much."

I smiled, glancing over at my sweet, handsome boyfriend. I didn't want this night to end. And maybe it didn't have to. "Do you have a curfew?"

Emmett shook his head. He stared down into the darkness of the footwell. "I may have told my mom that I might sleep over with you if you asked."

"You really told your mom that? And she was okay with it?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Emmett had finally looked up at me. "We had a really long conversation about sex last year when she first found out that I was sleeping with Alfie. She pretty much told me she knew I'd find a way to do it, even if she forbid it. She just wanted me to be smart and do it safely."

"Isn't that what all parents say? Mike told me I should always have condoms, and be a gentleman, and never push the person—although he said *girl*—into doing anything."

"No. We talked about that, too. But I mean safe, as in doing it in a safe place. She made me promise to never go cruising in the Parkland Woods or to meet up with someone I don't know from an app. And not just because of STIs and stuff, but because they might hurt me."

My mouth dropped open. I'd never even considered that. But it made so much sense, given his history with that asshole Patrick.

"So, we should go back to my house then?" I raised my brows curiously, glancing at Emmett for confirmation.

"Only if you want. And we totally don't have to do anything. We can just watch a movie. Or even go to sleep."

I made the turn that would take us back to our neighborhood. "I'm not tired."

"Me, neither."

All the windows in my house were dark when I parked in the driveway. After getting out, me and Emmett joined hands. We were both smiley, continually throwing glances at each other. We headed around the back to go directly into my room. The motion detector light on the back porch

flashed on as I fumbled with my keys, searching for the right one. I wasn't sure if my shaky hands were from the adrenaline that had yet to fade or the nerves about what would happen once we got through the door. I finally found the correct key and let us in.

I rushed over to the interior door to flip the light switch so Emmett didn't have to shuffle around in the dark. I also locked the door to avoid any unpleasant walk-ins.

Emmett closed the back door, flipping the lock. Something about that tiny motion instantly turned me on.

I couldn't take my eyes off him, searching every inch of him. I dropped my keys onto the dresser and walked over to meet him in the middle of the room. "I want to be with you. Right now. I-If that's okay with you?"

"You mean like what we did this afternoon?"

I shook my head. "I mean, like, *everything*."

"Well, that's very okay with me. But do you have condoms?"

Feeling heat in my cheeks, I hesitantly said, "I have everything we need."

Emmett leaned in to press his lips to mine. Despite one arm being in a cast, his fingers nimbly undid the buttons on my shirt, without ever breaking the kiss. He put his good hand on my bare chest. My whole body trembled with anticipation.

I pushed Emmett's jacket off his shoulders. He lowered his arms to let it fall on the floor. His hands immediately returned to my body, finding their way down below my waist, massaging me through my pants.

I finally broke away from the kiss to remove my jacket, hanging it over the back of the desk chair. Emmett took the break as an opportunity to remove his own shirt.

My hands roved across all that lovely, warm, olive-toned skin. I pressed my lips to Emmett's shoulder, the hollow of his collarbone, his chest.

My hands shook as I reached for Emmett's belt buckle. I chewed on my bottom lip, unfastening it, moving on to the button on his pants and the zipper.

Emmett kicked his shoes off to the side. When his pants fell down, he stepped out of them and gave me a gentle nudge to move me backwards until my calves bumped against the bed and I could go no further.

I took deep breaths to calm my nerves. It really felt like I was doing this for the time. My breathing grew labored as my heartbeat picked up speed. These things were usually a sign that I was about to have a panic attack, but this didn't feel like that. This was exhilaration, not anxiety. Maybe there was a little anxiety. I worried I wouldn't be good. That I wouldn't know what to do.

Emmett kissed me, easily removing my belt without even having to look. The phrase below the belt popped into my mind, though this was a wholly different context.

Emmett got my pants down with his one good hand. And then his hand was inside my boxers, his mouth still on mine. When he hooked his injured arm around my back, his cast was scratchy against my bare skin, but I didn't mention it. I didn't want to ruin the mood.

Emmett leaned against me, pushing forward until we were both laying on the bed, with his legs straddling my waist. His good hand tangled into my hair.

I gripped his thighs and lifted him a bit, rolling over so that I was now on top, his legs arched on either side of me. I pulled my lips from his to kiss a line down his torso, all the way to his black boxer-briefs. I stood up and removed them with a quick motion that made Emmett giggle and smile wider than I had ever seen. He propped up on his elbows. "Someone's excited."

My eyes dipped from his face. "I'm not the only one."

That made him laugh.

I dropped to kneel on the floor, doing my best to mimic what I'd seen in videos and what I remembered of Emmett's efforts this afternoon. That seemed like forever ago now.

Emmett grabbed my shoulder. "Not so many teeth. Preferably none."

"Sorry." I mumbled, trying to keep the advice in mind as I continued for a few minutes. I was thinking way too much about it, and it probably wasn't any good. I suspected the noises Emmett made were more out of politeness than actual pleasure.

I sat up and scowled at Emmett. "I suck, don't I?"

Emmett laid a hand on my cheek. "Well, you tried to." He was trying very hard not to laugh.

I tapped my fist against Emmett's knee. "Not funny."

"I'm just teasing. You did great for your first time. You'll do even better the more you practice. Which I'm more than willing to help you with."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I'll just bet you are."

Emmett leaned in to kiss me, slipping his tongue through my lips.

When I broke away and stood up, Emmett grabbed my hips to draw me closer between his legs. He kissed my stomach in a few different spots before he looked up at me. "Want me to show you how it's done?"

"I'd appreciate that."

I tried to pay attention to everything Emmett was doing, but I soon forgot that, as the feeling overwhelmed me. I stopped Emmett before he could finish the job. I didn't want this to be over yet. There was a lot more that I wanted to do.

When Emmett stood up, I gave him a quick, fervid kiss. As soon as my eyes met his, my face grew intensely hot. I didn't know how to ask what I wanted to ask. "Would it be okay if we—would you mind if I—"

"I'm gonna need some context clues here, babe."

"I want you to be the one..." I laid my hands on Emmett's chest, staring down at my fingernails, which were chewed to nubs, too embarrassed to even look him in the eye. I couldn't even finish the sentence.

Emmett put his hand under my chin and lifted it so I would look at him. "I can't do it if you don't ask."

I cleared my throat. My mouth had suddenly gone parched. "I've been thinking about this—us together and what it would look like—a lot. Especially the last few weeks since we've actually been dating. And I keep thinking the same thing. And I don't know if you are okay with this—"

Emmett smiled at me. "I'm okay being the bottom. Alfie was kind of insistent on it. Maybe he thought it was less gay. I don't know."

I shook my head. "That's not what I was gonna say."

"Oh?" After a second, Emmett's eyes went wide. " *Oh !* You mean *you* want to—okay." He nodded. "I wasn't expecting that."

I brought my hands up to cover my face and turned away, mortified. I felt totally naked—in the not-fun, emotionally vulnerable, embarrassed kind of way. This was a bad idea. I should've let it go, let Emmett do that part.

Emmett pried my hands away from my face. He was standing in front of me, his body almost, but not quite, touching me. Still close enough to feel the heat radiating off him. He reached up and held my face in his hands. "I'm okay with that, too. If that's really what you want."

I blinked frantically, trying not to meet Emmett's eyes. But we were so close. It was almost impossible to avoid looking directly at him with his hands holding my face. So, I conceded and met his gaze. "It's weird that I want that, right? I've only been with girls, so I had to be... I had to be the guy."

"Baby, it's not weird at all. And you *are* the guy. And so am I."

"You aren't, like, totally turned off by me right now?"

"Let me just check." Emmett looked down between us, then back up at me.
"Nope. It doesn't appear that I am."

That actually made me laugh. My tension faded as I wrapped my arms around him, leaning against him.

Emmett kissed me deeply, passionately. Then he said, "If I were turned off by the thought of having sex with you, *in any way*, we wouldn't be here right now. That's just like a lot of internalized homophobia messing with your brain."

I felt like I might cry. But I didn't know why.

Emmett's hands slid down to my shoulders, then to my chest, and down to my waist. "You understand it probably won't feel good at first. Maybe not at all the first time. It can take some getting used to."

"I know. I've read a lot about this. About what to expect and how to prepare. I just want to try. It's how I keep imagining it happening."

"Okay."

I pressed my lips together, trying not to smile. I took Emmett's left hand and led him over to the nightstand. I lifted the lamp and removed a skeleton key from beneath it. I used the key to unlock the top drawer of the nightstand, opening it to show Emmett the contents: a bottle of lube and a box of condoms.

"That's definitely what we need." Emmett said, staring at the drawer. He looked up at me. "How do you want to do this?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. Didn't we just go through that?

"Like do you have a position in mind?" he clarified.

"I want to look at you, like face-to-face, if that's okay."

Emmett nodded, giving me a kiss. "That's perfect. Just tell me if I do anything you don't like, or if it hurts too much."

"I will."

"Well, it'll be easier if you stay relaxed," Emmett said.

He told me to sit on the bed, so I did. He got on his knees and pressed his hand against my stomach, pushing me to lie back. I complied without question. I let Emmett maneuver my body as he wanted.

After a few minutes of my body quivering in response to his actions, he stopped. I looked up to see that he'd sat back on his haunches. He grabbed the bottle from the drawer and looked down, grimacing and grunting. He looked up to meet my eyes and smiled. "Putting on condoms is not something I've ever had to do on myself."

"I can help."

"I got it."

He crawled on top of me, nestling between my propped up legs, and kissed me. He was balancing on his elbow, his injured arm resting alongside my shoulder. Suddenly, his good hand was between my legs, somewhere it had never been before. His fingers were slippery and chilly—from the lube, I realized. My head rolled back enjoying the sensation. It felt much better when he did it than the few times I'd tried.

"Let me know if you want me to stop," Emmett said. "Like at any time."

"Okay."

"Are you ready?"

I nodded.

I winced, squeezing my eyes shut. The pressure was intense. I started to shiver, because it kind of hurt, but it also kind of felt sort of good. It was a difficult sensation to describe. I could hardly catch my breath.

"Open your eyes." Emmett's voice was soft and tender. "Look at me."

I peeled my eyelids apart. Emmett was staring into my eyes. Those gorgeous green eyes had never held such intensity before. He was sort of rocking over me slowly and I could feel the effects, both painful and pleasurable.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I gasped between puffs of air.

"I can stop if you want."

I shook my head, unable to speak again. I didn't want him to go anywhere, so I wrapped one of my legs around his back. It didn't occur to me that would bring him closer. I gasped as he hit a spot that made my whole body tingly and warm. I melted beneath him, dissolving into a gelatinous blob. No longer human, just a collection of nerve-endings.

My shaky hand grabbed onto his shoulder. My fingers pressed deep into the muscle. The olive skin going pale around my fingertips. I now understood why girls sometimes left claw marks on their partners. If I didn't have short, stubby nails, Emmett would probably be scarred.

I pressed my lips tightly to hold in the moans that kept forcing their way from my throat. I was very glad that my room was on a different floor than everyone else's. Emmett's lips crushed against mine. His kisses helped to muffle the sounds.

At some point (I really didn't know how long, because time had lost all meaning), he started moving faster. The pressure and the pleasure increased all at once. I didn't know if I could take anymore. But I didn't want him to stop either. I never wanted him to stop.

I knew before Emmett said it that he was almost done. He quickly finished me off before getting there himself.

Emmett pulled away and discarded the condom into the wastebasket beside the nightstand. He collapsed on top of me, burying his face in my neck, sucking in heavy gulps of air. He didn't seem to care about the mess he'd created between us. "Oh my God!" He repeated this three times with varying degrees of ecstasy.

My voice was barely a breath. "I know what you mean." I kissed the top of his head and brushed my hand through his sweat-dampened hair.

Emmett laughed and turned his head. He kissed my cheek, then my lips. "How was it for you?"

I didn't know how to answer that. I knew going in that the first time wouldn't be great for me. Everything I read said it would be horrible and painful and I wouldn't like it. I read it was rare for people to enjoy it until they got used to it. I'd fully prepared myself to absolutely hate it. Maybe that's why I didn't. I had certainly had a lot of pain, mostly at the beginning. But I also got so much pleasure. Which was a very pleasant surprise. I could barely form thoughts by the end of it, let alone words.

And it was great in other ways. The intimacy I felt whenever Emmett looked me in the eye. The fact that Emmett became a part of me. It was, in a word, "Intense."

Emmett squinted his eyes. "Is that good?"

I bobbed my head up and down, still feeling slightly disconnected from my body. "Yeah."

Emmett kissed me again. Then he propped himself up to look between us and back at me. "Thank God you have your own bathroom."

I laughed, which kind of made my insides sore. I wondered how long that was going to last.

"Want to take a shower with me?" Emmett asked, grinning from ear to ear.

"You go ahead. I need a minute."

"Okay." Emmett kissed me before hopping up. He looked back over his shoulder and said, "I love you, Clay."

"I love you, too, baby."

When Emmett went inside, I laid down and stretched out, grateful for a moment to recuperate. I just laid there, listening to the soft sounds of my breath. The subtle whoosh of running water coming from the open bathroom door. A cloud of fog shimmered in the yellow glow of the bathroom light, wafting out in curling tendrils before dissipating into nothingness.

After Emmett got out, I took a turn. I stood under the boiling hot water, letting it relax my muscles, recalling every detail of what just happened. Brushing my fingers over every spot I could recall where he kissed me, where his lips and tongue lingered on my skin. I took my time remembering it all. Not just because I wanted to commit it to memory, so I could remember it all in as much detail as possible for the rest of my life. But also because it seemed almost sacrilegious to wash away his kisses without commemorating each one.

When I left the bathroom, Emmett was sitting on the edge of the bed in his boxer-briefs, his feet propped up on the wood railing that ran along the side of the bed. He smiled at me. "Are you still okay with me spending the night?"

I rolled my eyes. "No, Emmett. I'm going to toss you out at two-thirty in the morning after you fucked me. Because I'm a total piece of garbage."

"Sarcasm is not a pretty color on you, baby."

"Then, let's try on some sincerity." I walked over and wrapped my arms around Emmett, holding him close. "If I didn't have to, I'd never let you leave my side." I kissed the top of his damp hair, taking in a deep breath through my nose. Emmett smelled like me—my soap, my shampoo. I missed the scent of that sweet coconut scented shampoo he normally used.

"That's sounds a little codependent, don't you think?"

I chuckled. "You really are such a bitch."

Emmett rewarded me with one of his genuine, boisterous laughs.

When I released him, he scooted to the top of the bed and shimmied under the covers.

Rather than putting on my boxers from earlier, I grabbed a fresh pair from my dresser. I removed the towel and pulled them on quickly. It was stupid, but I felt a little embarrassed being naked now, getting heated in the face.

I flipped the light out and hurried over to the bed. I got under the covers, moving in close to Emmett. He rolled onto his right side so I could snuggle up behind him. I was glad he didn't want to be the big spoon. He preferred the right side of the bed and his cast created problems when we cuddled. Last week we fell asleep watching *10 Things I Hate About You* —another stellar adaptation of a classic, according to Emmett (just a great movie, according to me). Emmett accidentally smacked me in the jaw with his cast upon waking. It didn't cause any damage, not even a bruise, just some brief pain and annoyance.

I kissed Emmett's shoulder after we shared goodnights. I drifted off quickly, which was rare for me. I suppose it was a night for rarities.

Chapter 59 - Afterglow

- *Emmett* -

I opened my eyes to see beige walls instead of the vivid blue that surrounded my bed. My window was missing, replaced by a framed basketball jersey. I forgot for a moment that I slept at Clay's. In his bed. With his body pressed against my back.

Clay's hand rubbed up and down my side, moving around to my belly and up to my chest as he pressed against me, grinding his morning wood against my back. I didn't mind it, though. Especially when he started lazily kissing my shoulder.

"Good morning, baby," Clay said with a thick, just-awakened voice, deeper than usual.

I didn't want him to stop, so I leaned back into it, my hand grasping his hip, to pull him closer. "Morning."

Clay made a little moaning sound in the back of his throat, pressing harder against me. This continued for a few minutes with Clay kissing my shoulders and neck, nibbling on my earlobe. I loved that so much.

"Last night was so amazing," I said.

"Mm-hmm." Clay nodded against the side of my head. When he breathed out, I smelled mint. This bastard got up before me and brushed his fucking teeth.

"I'd kiss you, but my breath probably reeks," I complained passive aggressively.

Clay rolled away for a moment and returned, holding something against my lips. I opened my mouth and tasted a minty sweetness on my tongue.

"Okay, Boy Scout. You really thought of everything, huh?" I wondered how long he'd been awake to come up with that move.

"We can keep going if you want," I said.

Clay mumbled something incoherent against my ear, still rubbing against me.

"What?"

"My family will be waking up soon."

"I'm sure you could be quick."

"Do you really want to?"

I craned my neck around to look into his eyes. I nodded. "I kinda really do."

I reached between us to push my hand into his boxers.

Clay turned away again and returned with a condom, which he quickly rolled on. He grabbed the bottle of lube we left sitting out on the nightstand and prepared me the way I had for him.

As I predicted, it didn't take long for Clay to get into it. A few minutes later, it was over and Clay was panting in my ear. Clay was very clearly not a virgin, because he handled this part very well, finding the spot that made me turn to jelly in his arms with ease.

"You're very good at that," I said.

"Am I?"

I rolled over and propped my head up to look at Clay, who was grinning brightly. He seemed much too pleased with himself. But I didn't want to take this joy away from him by making a joke about him being the conceited one for once. This was only the second time Clay had ever had sex with a guy, and I wanted him to remember the experience fondly. I

leaned forward to kiss him, thankful for the mint he gave me. "You are, actually."

Clay rubbed his fingers across my chest. "Can I ask you a question?"

"I don't know if you *can* , but you may."

Clay groaned, rolling his eyes as he turned his face into his pillow. "Okay, nerd. Whatever."

I laughed and kissed his cheek. "Ask your question."

He peeked through his lashes with the one eye that wasn't pressed to the pillow. "Do you have a preference?"

"Men."

Clay leaned toward me to beat his head against my shoulder. "Fucking hell. That's not what I meant." He pulled back to look at me. "I'm being serious."

"Okay. A preference for what?"

"Well, between last night and then what just happened, we've both done both. Do you like one way more than other?"

I moved in close to his face, grinning. "Are you asking if I'm a top or a bottom, Clay?"

"I was trying to avoid those terms, because it still feels weird to me saying them, but yeah. Basically."

"Last night was the first time I ever topped."

"Really?"

When Clay rolled onto his side and rested a hand on my waist, I rested my head on his pillow. Our faces were so close our noses almost touched. The heat of his skin radiated across the inch of space between our bodies, warming me all the way from my shoulders to my toes where his foot was

caressing mine. "Alfie's the only guy I've had sex with before you. And like I said, he insisted. And I liked him, so I did what he wanted."

"Did you like it better? Last night, I mean."

I brushed my fingers through Clay's messy, bedraggled hair. "I did. But that doesn't mean I need you to do that ever again if you don't want to. What we did this morning was great. I wasn't kidding. You really are good."

Clay squinted his eyes, creating a line between his brows. "But you liked last night better. Right?" His voice had a slight tremor, sounding a little hesitant.

"It's different. Both are great! And if you're up for it, I'd like to continue doing both. But, I don't want to lie, so yes."

"I could tell." The corner of Clay's mouth quirked up.

"What? How?"

"You just had this look last night. I mean, I knew you enjoyed this morning, too. The way you kept pulling me closer. But there was just something in your eyes last night."

"It was you."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know if I can explain it exactly. And it's probably gonna sound really douchey if I try."

He raised one finger to stroke my chin. "I won't judge."

"It was just like when you were really into it, I got like a charge knowing that I caused that feeling for you. It made it feel better for me somehow."

"I liked last night better too."

" *You did ?*" I didn't mean to sound so shocked. "Didn't it hurt? When I first started with Alfie, I kind of hated it. It took several times before I started to enjoy it."

"It was painful at first, but then once I got over the initial, like... I don't know. I don't want to say shock, 'cause that's the wrong word. Like, once I understood the mechanics, I guess, and I could relax, it just got really good. I just felt like... I felt like I finally understood what I've been missing all this time... why sex never really felt right."

"Sounds like you had real come to Jesus moment." I grinned.

Clay let out a long breath, like the disappointed hiss of a deflating balloon. "Did you really just make a sex pun about Jesus?"

"I think I did." I nodded, cracking into a smirk. "Yeah."

"Maybe I should get out of this bed before it gets struck by lightning." Clay moved as if he were about to get up.

Laughing, I threw myself on top of him to prevent him from going anywhere. He also laughed, then he kissed my cheek. "I guess you want me to go down with you, huh?"

"Going down with you sounds like a hell of a good time."

"Stop making everything so dirty." Clay tried to hide his amusement, but he failed miserably.

I started kissing all over his face, which made him giggle. With my leg wedged between both of his, I felt him getting excited again.

I started kissing down Clay's neck.

Before I could move below his collarbone, a knock on the door interrupted my progress. Someone tried the knob, which didn't budge, since he locked it. They knocked again.

"Clay," Mrs. Miller said.

I stared into his widened eyes. He called out, "Yeah?"

I started kissing his shoulder. I loved the line of freckles there. They were so cute.

"Stop," he whispered.

I smiled at him, moving to kiss his lips. He started kissing me back, his hands trailing up and down my spine.

"Are you hungry?" Mrs. Miller asked. "I'm making waffles."

Clay turned his head as I kissed his neck. "Uh, yeah. Sure, Mom. I'll be out in a minute."

"Okay."

Clay gave me a peck on the lips and whispered, "You can sneak out the back way, if you want. I can keep them distracted."

"Oh, and, Clay," Mrs. Miller said. "Would you ask Emmett if he'd also like some waffles, too?"

Clay's mouth fell open. I just snickered as I fell over sideways into my former spot. The sheets already gone cool from my brief absence.

Clay turned to me, no longer bothering to lower his voice. "Do you want waffles, baby?"

"Yes."

"He wants waffles!" Clay yelled.

"Blueberry, chocolate chip, or plain?" Mrs. Miller asked.

"Ooh!" I decided to speak for myself. "Is all of the above an option?"

"Sure thing," Mrs. Miller said.

Clay flopped over on top of me, burying his face in my chest. "I can't believe that just happened."

I laughed again, running my fingers through his hair. "It's okay, honey."

"Do you think she heard us earlier?"

"I'd say there's a decent chance."

Clay's voice came out slightly muffled as his lips moved against my chest to speak. "And you aren't humiliated?"

"Why? Because we were having sex? You're my boyfriend. That's what boyfriends do. Don't be such a prude."

Clay picked up his head to glare at me. "It's my mom! Like, I know she knows I've had sex before. And I'm sure she suspected me and you would do it at some point, but I didn't want her to be in the next room."

I wrapped my arms around Clay's shoulders, kissing his temple, trying desperately not to laugh at his pitiful expression.

He was too freaked out to go beyond kissing now, so we dragged ourselves out of bed to get dressed. I borrowed a shirt and a pair of basketball shorts, since my suit wasn't exactly appropriate breakfast attire.

Clay hesitated and took a deep breath before opening his bedroom door. He kept his eyes low as he crossed the kitchen to sit at the table in the same chair he always sat in, crossing his arms over his chest. Teddy was the only other person at the table. His dark ringlets were a mess, giving off major Doc Brown vibes. Mrs. Miller was pouring batter into the waffle iron.

I didn't bother hurrying after Clay. Mrs. Miller knew what she knew. There was no point in being embarrassed about it. As long as she didn't freak out on me for defiling her son, I didn't much care what she knew.

Mrs. Miller turned to face me. "Do you want some coffee, sweetheart? Or maybe juice?"

"Coffee sounds great. We were up really late."

"Emmett!" Clay had turned in his chair, gripping the back with white knuckles, glaring at me. He shook his head.

That's not what I meant. I couldn't help snickering at his distraught face.

"How was the date?" she asked, handing me a mug. She gestured to the coffee station they had set up next to the microwave, on its own separate counter. "I want to hear all about it. Where'd you go?"

After adding a splash of the creamer, I poured in an inordinate amount of sugar. "Clay took me to that Italian steakhouse across town. Stefano's."

"Ooh! I love that place. They have such a good merlot. It's perfect with their filet mignon."

I went to the silverware drawer and got out a spoon to stir my coffee. After I finished with it, I licked it and put it in the sink. "I wouldn't know about that, but the steak was pretty great."

"Did you do anything else?" Mrs. Miller asked as she took out the golden brown waffles and poured more batter onto the iron.

"We went dancing at this place I know," I said, leaning against the counter behind me.

"That was fun," Clay mused, no longer sulking. He even had a hint of a smile.

Mrs. Miller chuckled and threw a look over her shoulder at me. "Clay's always loved dancing. You should see him at a wedding. He's the life of the party. He can even get the wallflowers going."

I grinned, glancing over at my adorable boyfriend, who just kept getting more adorable with every new thing I learned about him.

She cracked up, laughing about something, and clutched her stomach. She looked over at Clay. "Do you remember when you were eight and I taught

you the hustle? My parents' 50th anniversary party."

Clay nodded, also looking amused. "I had everyone on the floor doing it."

"I have a video." Mrs. Miller tapped me on the shoulder. "I'll send it to you later."

"Fantastic!"

Mrs. Miller handed me a plate and waved to the counter where she'd set up her own waffle bar with several fruits, whipped cream, chocolate sauce, and three different syrups.

I started with a blueberry waffle, adding fresh blueberries, whipped cream, and a drizzle of maple syrup. Clay came over to make his own, brushing a hand along the small of my back. He chose chocolate chip, drowning it with syrup, filling each of the tiny squares on his waffle.

We stuffed our faces, both of us returning for seconds. I had just gotten my third helping when Rachel shuffled in, wiping her eyes. One of her purple streaks stuck up in the center of her head like the feathers of a cockatiel.

Mrs. Miller handed her a plate, which she loaded up with everything on offer, and trudged to the table, yawning as she took her seat across from Clay. She got four bites into her waffle before she noticed me. Her eyes went wide. "Hi! I didn't know you were coming over."

Rachel's eyes dipped down to my chest. "Why are you wearing Clay's shirt?"

I looked down to see that the shirt Clay gave me had HUNTINGTON HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS DEPT printed across the front. A box beneath that had *Lennox-Miller* handwritten in thick black marker. "You gave me your gym clothes."

"Relax. It's a spare," Clay said.

"Seriously, though." Rachel waved her hand to draw our attention from each other. "Why are you—"

Rachel examined me more carefully. She seemed particularly interested in my hair, which I imagined was a mess—I hadn't looked in a mirror yet, to be sure. I could see her weary mind processing all this information. Her gaze bounced back and forth between me and Clay, her mouth slowly falling open. "You slept here!"

I nodded.

She leaned down close to the table and lowered her voice. "Did you guys... y'know?"

Clay looked at me. "Don't answer that."

"You totally did it!"

" *Rachel* !" Clay growled.

"Who did what?" Mr. Miller asked, entering the kitchen. He went over to kiss Mrs. Miller's cheek. She handed him a plate, already fixed. He came over and sat at the end of the table. "Morning, kids."

Mr. Miller did a double take when he glanced at me. "Hello."

"Hi." I gave a meek wave.

Mr. Miller looked at Clay, who was staring at his plate, pushing the remnants of his waffle through the brown lake of leftover syrup on his plate with his fork. Mr. Miller's gaze shifted to his wife as she sat down with her own plate. He seemed to be questioning my presence, though he didn't say a word. Mrs. Miller just shook her head and started eating.

Unfortunately, that was not the end of it. Rachel pouted as she glared at her mother. "So Clay can have his boyfriend sleep over, but my boyfriend can't even be in my room with the door closed."

Clay mouthed, "Bitch," at his sister.

She just stuck her tongue out at him.

Mr. Miller choked on his coffee. "Clay did what?"

Mrs. Miller waved a hand at him. "We'll talk about it later."

Rachel dropped her fork on her plate with a loud clatter. "Just because he's gay doesn't mean he should get special treatment."

"You're fifteen, Rachel," Mrs. Miller said. "Clay is almost eighteen. There's a big difference."

Rachel crossed her arms, narrowing her eyes. "You're telling me you would've let Summer spend the night with him and not said a word about it?"

Mrs. Miller cleared her throat and took a sip of her juice. The answer was clearly no.

"I just want to know how that is fair." She gestured toward me and Clay.

Clay was still fuming. His nostrils flared, his eyes scrunched into slits. "When we have sex, no one gets pregnant."

Oh my God! He did not just say that.

"I can't help that I have a uterus." Rachel's head swung to her mother and then she turned to Mr. Miller. "This is sexism."

"Clay! Rachel!" Mr. Miller grumbled, running a hand over his face. "Can we please drop this? At least until breakfast is over."

The tension in the room was palpable. Everyone seemed upset or annoyed. To avoid being in the middle of their family discussion, I said, "I think I should go."

"Don't." Clay grabbed my thigh as I twisted in my seat to get up.

I gripped his hand, giving it a brief squeeze. "I really should get home. My mom will be calling soon, anyway."

Clay ignored his family and leaned in to give me a peck on the lips. "Call me."

I glanced sideways at the family, all of them watching, before looking back at Clay. "I kinda need a ride home."

"Oh my God! I'm so dumb. Of course." Clay jumped up and followed me back to the bedroom, where I gathered up my clothes, placing them into an empty gym bag, which he held open for me. He zipped the bag and slung it over his shoulder.

I paused at the door when I noticed my tattered copy of *The Great Gatsby* (the spine broken so many times the name was no longer legible), laying on Clay's desk. I pointed it out. "Have you read any of it?"

"The whole thing." Clay held up two fingers. "Twice."

"You read it twice?" I couldn't help but smile. I mean, it wasn't that long. It was no *Moby Dick* or *War and Peace*. The month he'd had it was certainly enough time to do so. He just seemed so reluctant to even give it a try when I asked him to read it.

"I really liked it." Clay reached out for my good hand, lacing our fingers together.

"What was your favorite part?"

"Honestly, your notes."

"My notes?"

"Yeah. You're kind of hilarious, baby. You should be like a book reviewer or something."

"I mean, that would be like a dream come true, but it's hard to break into doing that as a job, and I don't have the time to do it as a hobby."

"I especially loved where you wrote like a whole page-long diatribe at the end of the book about what a selfish bitch Daisy is. I'm not sure I

completely agree with everything you said—it was kinda vicious—but I could mostly see where you were coming from."

I brought my free hand up to cover my mouth, feeling slightly embarrassed about that. "I was going through something with Alfie when I wrote that."

Clay nodded. "I figured. You accidentally switched into male pronouns near the end."

"I've never noticed that."

Clay reached over to pick up the book, holding it out towards me. "I'm sorry I didn't give it back sooner."

"Keep it."

"Really?" Clay's lips stretched into a wide smile as he hugged it to his chest.

I stepped up to give him a peck on the lips. "I can't take away your favorite part of the book."

"Have you annotated any other books?"

"Tons." I was kind of turned on that Clay knew what annotated meant, which I know was a really weird thing to get turned on by.

He laid the book down and walked outside. "I'd love to read some of them."

I followed him, closing the door behind me. "Sure," I said, nodding. I loved that I could share this part of myself with him, and he genuinely seemed excited about it. If it would get Clay to read more, I would annotate every book in my collection.

"I'll give you my copy of *Wuthering Heights* next. Honestly, knowing the things you like, you're probably going to hate the actual book, because all the characters are unlikeable—although it's on purpose, they're not meant to be liked. But I reread it after I caught Alfie with that girl last year, when he ghosted me. So practically every character gets one of those tirades at some point in the book. Cathy and Heathcliff each got more than one."

He took my left hand in his, lacing our fingers as we walked around the house. "I can't wait!"

Chapter 60 - Look What You Made Me Do

- *Emmett* -

As soon as Clay drove away, I rushed over to Carrie's house to fill her in on the date. When I first told her I was spending my first night of freedom with Clay, she was disappointed. To appease her, I promised to tell her everything. Of course, I never got home to call her. She was probably livid.

"It's just me, Mom." I called out to let Dr. Herrera know who'd just entered. It had been three weeks since I was allowed to cross the street.

"Don't slam the door," Dr. Herrera yelled from the kitchen.

"Sorry." I was a little too overzealous.

Carrie was still asleep when I entered her room. I flipped on the light and took a running leap onto the bed beside her. She whined loudly and pulled a pillow over her head.

"Wake up!"

"Fuck off," Carrie said, half asleep.

"Fine." I lifted the pillow over her head and leaned in close to speak directly into her ear. "Then you won't get to hear about the amazing sex I had last night. *And* this morning."

Carrie gasped, her eyes flying open. She threw the pillow off and sat up to look at me. Her curls were a mess, half of them flattened against the side of her head. "With Clay?"

"Of course with Clay! Who else?"

"So he's good?"

I smiled wide. "Let's just say, I will never ever... *ever, ever, ever* be sad about losing Alfie again."

"Mmm. That good?"

"Alfie doesn't even hold a candle to Clay. He was very enthusiastic and eager to please. I didn't think it was possible to be more in love with this boy. But I so am."

"Tell me everything."

"First of all, there's this." I pulled my phone out and showed her the picture my mother took. "Is he not gorgeous?"

Carrie pinched her fingers on the screen and spread them wide to zoom in on Clay. "I love his new hair."

"Right?"

I started with dinner at the overpriced restaurant. "He bought me a forty-dollar steak. He wouldn't let me see the bill, but it had to be over a hundred dollars because he got the same thing as me, plus an appetizer and dessert."

"No wonder you put out."

I grabbed her discarded pillow and whacked her shoulder with it. "I'm not that kind of girl. I put out because my boyfriend is hot and I wanted to."

Carrie got up and went to her vanity to brush her hair out. "I can't believe you had sex right after eating, though. Such a bad call. I'd probably barf on the guy. Or God forbid you get gassy."

"It wasn't right after." I scooted to the edge of the bed to hang my legs over. "I took him to Vibrant first for a couple hours."

Carrie cackled with glee. She turned in her chair to look at him. "You took that shy little pop tart to a gay club. He must've lost his fucking mind."

"He loved it. He even got a phone number." My lips twisted up at the corner.

"And that makes you smile *because* ..." She dragged out the last word, trailing off.

"Because he just wiped it off like it was nothing. And then he danced with me. Honestly, I should've known by the way he dances that he's good in bed."

Carrie went to her dresser to pull out some clothes. "I love a man who can dance."

"My man is amazing."

"Aw, Emmie." Carrie returned to me to poke my cheek. "You are adorable."

I swiped at her hand, leaning back on my elbows.

"Now, let's get to the good part." Carrie stripped her shirt off, totally unconcerned about being topless in front of me, even if I didn't care for it. I was grateful when she put on a sports bra.

"We went back to his house."

Carrie put her hands on her hips and grimaced. "Not exactly romantic, is it?"

"It was great actually." I grinned, thinking back to last night.

"So you just did it in his room?" She looked disappointed.

I wondered what she expected. Clay wasn't going to rent some lavish hotel room. And I certainly wouldn't want one of those rent-by-the-hour rooms at the motel down by the highway. Just the thought made me itchy.

"Pretty much," I answered. "We started out just kissing. Then the clothes started coming off. He was a little awkward at first, his hands were so shaky, and he tried to hide it, acting like he wasn't nervous, but I could see

it. It was actually really sweet. After a few minutes, he really started getting into it. And that's basically it."

Carrie scoffed, exchanging her pajama pants for tight workout shorts. "I expected more of a blow-by-blow account. Where are the specifics?"

I let out an irritated groan. "Interesting choice of words, Care."

"You know what I mean." She slapped my knee before a mischievous smile stretched her lips. "But now that you mention it, did he?"

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't stop from smiling. I knew she'd guess by the look on my face, so I confessed. "He did. That's the part he was most awkward about, but you know how it is when you've never done it before. And like I said, he was into it. He just needs time. He was definitely more into it when I did it for him."

Carrie laughed. "Of course he was."

"Stop. Clay is totally not like that. He was just so nervous and cute the whole time. You should have seen his face when asked me to—" I pressed my lips together, realizing I'd almost said way too much.

She stared at me curiously. "Asked you to what?"

"I can't say. That's too personal."

"Since when is anything too personal for us."

"All I'll say is, like, give the boy a medal, because this morning, it lasted maybe five minutes, and I could barely get my legs working. And last night was one of the most intense times of my entire life. And he was really into kissing the whole time. Which was kinda weird for me—but like in a really good way—because Alfie would kiss me, but hardly ever when we were actually having sex. Unless he was super drunk or high. The whole thing with Clay was just amazing."

Carrie giggled. "Now that's the kinda stuff I want to hear about."

"Clay is so awesome, Care." I sat up straight, gripping my knees. "I've never had a guy treat me the way he does. And I'm not talking about the sex."

Carrie huffed. "Anyone is going to look like a saint after Alfie. I guess that's the silver lining of having your first boyfriend be an overbearing, unfeeling asshole."

"No." I shook my head. I didn't want her to think of it like that. "It's not that he's a good guy compared to Alfie; he's just a genuinely good guy. He really cares about me. He doesn't just say he loves me, he proves it in little ways all the time. He knows my favorite things. He always lets me play my music in his car, even though I know he doesn't like most of it, and he listens to me ramble about my opinions on everything. I mean, he actually actively listens. And he thinks I'm funny. *Nobody* but you thinks I'm funny. But he does."

"I'm happy for you, Emmie." Carrie said as she got down to lie on the floor and look under her bed.

"What are you doing?"

"I can't find my other tennis shoe." She pushed herself up into a crawling position. Her head swiveled around, scanning everything with a pensive look on her face. Her eyes lit up, and she jumped to her feet, rushing over to dig through the throw pillows in her window seat, only to come up empty-handed. "Shit!"

I scrunched my face in confusion, looking her over. "What the hell are you even dressing for?"

Carrie was not a workout clothes type of girl. The only gym clothes she owned were the sweat pants that she wore to veg out on the sofa during one of our binge-watching sessions.

"I had to fill the last three weeks without you somehow." she snapped, suddenly enraged.

"What does that mean?"

Carrie groaned and went to her closet. She dragged out a duffel bag and pulled out a set of pompoms.

My eyes went wide, shocked. "You didn't."

Carrie nodded, whimpering. "I joined the fembots."

I raised a hand to cover my mouth. "Honey, why? You hate cheerleaders. And you hate Whitley. Maybe even more than I do."

Carrie threw her pompoms down and crossed her arms over her chest. "They were the only team open for new members. Thank God Charity Howard fell off the pyramid and broke her leg or I wouldn't even have them."

I stood up and walked over, wrapping my arms around her, patting her on the side of the head. I chose to ignore the fact she was grateful for another girl getting maimed. "It's always the children that get hurt the worst in these trying situations. I'm so sorry, baby girl."

Carrie punched me lightly in the gut. "You should be."

I rubbed my stomach, returning to my seat on the bed. "So, what's with the getup?"

"Whitley insists on having team workouts on Saturday. She claims it builds camaraderie to spend time together outside of school and games, but I know she does it because she's on a power trip."

"Then quit." I said. "I'm back now. No more grounding."

Carrie shook her head. "As horrified as I am to admit this out loud, I kinda like it. Most of the girls are really sweet. Plus, I'm planning a coup against Whitley. I'm going to take everything she loves and leave her crying on the ground."

"You really have been busy without me, huh?"

Carrie shrugged, flipping a hand out to the side. "Somebody's gotta put Fascist Barbie in her place. If not me, then who?"

I grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "I'm sorry I wasn't around for you, Care. But if you can squeeze in some time between cheer duties and your plot against the regime, I still want to be your best friend."

"Oh, Emmie. My sweet, stupid boy." She brushed her hand across my cheek. "You will always be my best friend. My confidante. The person whose sweater I steal to cover my ass when a dumb bitch rips my skirt off in front of sixty people."

"You know, every time you tell that story, the number of people goes up. I was actually there, remember? It couldn't have been over twenty. We were in a friggin' stairwell."

She gripped my face in one hand, squishing tightly until my lips pressed into a pucker. "My best friend who doesn't *correct me* on my recollection of traumatic memories."

"Gotcha." I mumbled, giving her a thumbs up. "It was totally sixty. Maybe more."

Carrie leaned in to give me a peck on the cheek. "That's my boy."

Chapter 61 - Everything I Wanted

- *Clay* -

Before last night, I never understood my friends' obsession with getting laid. When I had sex the first time, I left feeling deeply underwhelmed. I assumed my dissatisfaction was because I barely knew the girl. We met on vacation when I was fifteen. Her family was staying in the hotel suite next door. She was a year older than me. We kept bumping into each other in the hotel lobby, at breakfast, at the pool. I suspected she liked me because she was always watching me, smiling if she caught my eye. Alone in the elevator one day, she made her interest very clear when she kissed me (without consent). I kissed her back because it felt weird to be so unyielding. I suspected my friends would be delighted to be in this situation. So, I pretended. Doing what they would do. Then she grabbed my crotch, before breaking away to stare right into my eyes. All my friends were losing their virginity around that time, so I thought if the girl was up for it, I would try. I invited her back to my room, knowing Rachel had gone out shopping with Mom, and Dad was off doing whatever Dad did on vacations. Shuffleboard maybe? Sex was not the magical experience movies made it out to be. It was awkward and stressful and I barely finished. She seemed bored by the end. We didn't talk again afterwards.

I somehow managed to go almost two years without doing it again. Without even the desire to try. The two girls I dated during that time were both very into the idea of waiting. One of them—Ashley—was for religious, not-before-marriage reasons. She took me to a church picnic for our second date. We only dated for like a month because I found out she was an obsessive psycho with jealousy issues. The other girl—Dinah—just wasn't ready. We dated for over a year. Honestly, if Dinah hadn't moved to Ohio in January, I probably would've kept dating her until she got sick of me. I adored her. She was very sweet, and we liked a lot of the same older music.

Then came Summer. She had always been such a cool girl. Always sort of in my orbit. We weren't friends, but we hung out around the same places, at

the same parties. We'd occasionally end up spending time together, pre-gaming before a party or some sporting event. We cracked jokes all the time, and she loved that I loved dancing. I never really wanted to date her. I just wanted to be her friend.

Then my friends started hounding me about being single for four months and I felt pressured into asking her out. Brandon said she was perfect for me. We started dating at the end of May. About a month in, a game of Never Have I Ever, which I didn't even want to play, revealed that I'd had sex before. A few days later, she suggested our first time. Letting me know she'd done it with her previous boyfriend, so it wasn't a big deal. Instead of being honest, telling her I didn't want to, I said, "Okay." I genuinely cared for her, so I hoped it would be better. While it was less disastrous than my previous attempt, I still didn't think it was anything remarkable. I wasn't sure if it was good for Summer, but she kept initiating it, so I complied.

But none of that compared to being with Emmett. That was on a whole other level from before. Every kiss, every touch, brought pleasure before we even got to the actual sex part. The whole time, I hoped Emmett didn't know how nervous I was. More so than my first time with whatever her name was—I thought it started with a B.

Even though it was painful at times—and I was still a bit sore—it felt incredibly special. It was how I imagined my first time would be. I loved Emmett. And I knew Emmett loved me. This was just another way to show that love.

I smiled, thinking back on it on my drive to Brandon's house. I parked in front of the massive brick house that always made me massively uncomfortable. Brandon's parents and all three of his brothers were staunchly conservative. Even before I knew I was gay, I knew I had much more liberal ideologies than the Pendletons cared for. Once, during a discussion about allowing teachers to lead a prayer before class, I was asked my opinion. I stupidly told them my actual thoughts, opposing the idea. Stating that not every student in our school was Christian. I said, "By your standard, we'd have to lead a prayer for every major religion, which would be time-consuming." They looked horrified, like I'd just stood up and

plopped my dick on the dinner table. Brandon clamped a hand over his mouth, hardly able to contain his amusement.

Thankfully, I didn't have to go inside today. I walked around the side of the house, down to the pond. The others had already gathered on the lavish covered dock with fishing poles, availing themselves of cold beers from the fully stocked bar. The television suspended from the ceiling was playing a football game, but I didn't care to check the teams.

Duke was the only one missing. He'd barely spent any time with us since Emmett ended things with him. I suspected Duke didn't want to be around me. After all, I was the reason he didn't have Emmett. I could hardly blame him for being upset. Being Emmett-less was a sucky state to be in.

Laying eyes on me, Brandon froze, with a beer bottle hanging in midair in front of his lips. "What the fuck happened to you?"

Could he tell that I had sex—and that I actually enjoyed it for once? Was it written all over my face?

"What?" I asked, looking around at my friends, who all wore matching shocked expressions.

"Dude, your hair!" Jackson blurted.

"Oh." I touched it and chuckled. I'd completely forgotten about my hair change. But now that it was at the forefront of my mind, I worried about what they'd say. Would they say it looked stupid? Would they call it gay? "Um, yeah. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. I was with Rachel when she got hers done, so I just said 'fuck it' and did it, too."

That wasn't a total lie. I was with Rachel when I got it done, and it definitely was a "fuck it" moment for me, even if I didn't say the words aloud.

"I like it," Jackson said.

Brandon shook his head, setting his beer down on the whitewashed railing. "I mean, yeah, it's cool. But it's so unlike you. You never never do crazy shit like this. That's more my area of expertise."

I shrugged, crossing my arms loosely over my chest. "I'm trying to be more spontaneous. Not care so much about what other people think of me."

Brandon clapped me on the back, making me stumble forward a step. I always hated when he did that. "I've been saying that shit for years, bro. It's about fucking time you started listening to me."

Of all people, I should've known Brandon would be cool with it. He was very into appearances. He got regular manicures, and highlights to maintain his golden locks, which hadn't been naturally golden since about the fourth grade. He even had a tanning bed in his basement so he could keep a full tan year-round. He claimed the girls he hooked up with liked that he didn't have any tan lines.

I totally didn't get that. I loved Emmett's tan lines (his weren't nearly as prominent as mine, though). I liked the reminder that part of him was reserved for my eyes only.

I just laughed at Brandon's bravado and said, "I was a fool for ever ignoring you, Bran."

Brandon nudged my shoulder. "Damn straight."

"Jesus!" Mark shook his head, reeling in his lure. "Can we be done with all this *Queer Eye* shit already? I came here to fish, not gossip about Clay's hair."

My chest tightened. I suddenly couldn't breathe. It was the first time any of them had made a remark like that since I started my coming out journey. I'd thought that perhaps knowing a gay person—Emmett, obviously—had made them realize how harmful that kind of talk could be. They had an actual face to think about, not just some abstract idea of gay people.

Jackson's eyes met mine, probably to check that I was okay. I wasn't. What Mark said wasn't even the worst thing I'd ever heard. I didn't know why it was hitting me so hard.

In a moment that completely shocked me, Brandon whirled on Mark and yelled, "Did anyone ask for your worthless fucking opinion?" He looked around, raising his arms to the side, as if seeking someone to speak on Mark's behalf. "Didn't think so."

Mark looked terribly confused. "What the hell's your problem, bro?"

"I-I forgot... I forgot my phone... um, in my car." I backed away slowly, hoping they didn't notice the outline of my phone in my pocket. "I'll be right back."

As Brandon and Mark bickered, I flipped around and hiked back up the dock, doing my best not to flee too quickly. I needed to get away, but I didn't want them to get suspicious.

Once I was out of eyesight, I sprinted back to the driveway. My hands trembled as I fumbled with my keys to get my car unlocked. I nearly dropped them twice and accidentally hit the button to set my alarm. The horn beeped, making me jump. "Shit!"

I finally got it open and climbed in, doing the deep breathing trick to restrain the tears before they could start. It had worked so far.

I cranked the engine and turned the air on full blast. When Journey started berating me with "Don't Stop Believing," I hit the power button to silence Steve Perry. I needed quiet to work on steeling my nerves so I could get back out there. I definitely couldn't just leave. That would bring up too many unanswerable questions.

After a few minutes, my heart rate returned to a somewhat normal pace. It didn't feel like I was going into a panic attack anymore, so that was good.

I got out of the car and closed my eyes. I took a deep breath. The air around Brandon's house always had a musky, fishy smell because of their pond. I

hated that smell. But the others loved fishing, so I did my best to ignore it usually. Right now, it was making me want to spew my guts on the gravel driveway.

"Hey!"

I opened my eyes to see Brandon walking toward me. The gravel of the driveway crunched beneath his electric blue Reeboks.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You look kinda pale." He pointed toward the pond. "Look, I told Mark to cut out that homophobic shit."

I shook my head, trying for a laugh, but it was mostly just a strangled breath. "W-Why?"

"Because of you." He said that so matter-of-factly, as if I should know that.

"Me?" My chest felt heavy again. He totally knew. "I don't... I don't care about that."

"Come on, dude." Brandon eyed me for a long moment. "I know how close you are with Emmett."

Did he? Had he really figured it out? I kind of hoped he had, because this attitude was not what I expected from Brandon. Mostly because of his family, not so much Brandon himself.

"I know you guys are super tight, maybe even as tight as you and Jackson."

That was an understatement.

I wanted to laugh. I wasn't sure if I was more disappointed or relieved that he still thought me and Emmett were just friends.

I guess I was relieved. I wasn't really ready to deal with coming out to my friends yet. If I told Brandon, I'd have to tell Tyler and Mark. I couldn't imagine doing that. Especially not after what just happened. I was about ready to crawl back into the closet, turn off the light, and hide behind all the clothes.

"I know it's gotta suck to hear people talk shit about something that's a fundamental part of someone you care about. It's like when I hear my family being racist about immigrants, talking about Mexican people crossing the border and shit. It makes my blood boil because of Lucia, who practically raised me. Or some redneck at school saying the N-word. I get so pissed off because I love Duke and Summer. And I just want to punch that person."

I nodded. I said pretty much the same thing to Emmett about hearing people being homophobic. Only now those people would apply those same thoughts to me if they knew. Brandon didn't have to worry about that.

Brandon walked over and hooked his arm around my neck, shaking me. "Come on. If Mark says something else, I'll hold his arms and you can punch him in the balls a couple times."

I couldn't help but laugh, even though my heart was still racing. "Fine."

"Thank fuck! I was already about to strangle one of those assholes before you showed. It doesn't help that Tyler's being extra stupid today. And Mark's been acting like a bitch since he got here."

"What about Jackson?"

Brandon scoffed. "Jax is so pussy-whipped he doesn't go more than five minutes without texting his girlfriend. I about grabbed his goddamn phone and tossed it in the pond."

As we walked across the lawn toward the dock, I asked, "Hey, whatever happened with you and Emmett's friend—that Makenzie girl?"

"Oh, God." Brandon wrinkled his face with disgust. "That shit fizzled real quick. She's even more conceited than I am, if you can believe it."

"I really can't."

"Fuck you, dude!" He released me in order to shove me.

I shook my head and smiled as Brandon started laughing. He might be spoiled and self-centered, but he had a way of making people feel better. It's why I liked him so much.

Hopefully, he would still like me once he knew my secret.

Chapter 62 - This Love

- Emmett -

I paced the brick path at the entrance to the botanical garden, checking my phone every thirty seconds, as if I wouldn't feel the vibration of a notification alert. My lock screen remains blank.

"You are being way superfluous, Emmie," Carrie said, sounding quite bored. Draped across a bench, wearing a sleeveless army green romper, her bronze legs crossed with one of her sandals dangling from her toes. Her leg idly bounced, making the sole of the shoe flop against her foot as she stared at her phone.

I paused to look at her, confused. "What does that even mean?"

She grinned, not bothering to look up from her screen. "Extra. Over the top. Too much."

I rolled my eyes. I didn't have the brain capacity right now to explain how that was not the proper usage of that term. Just because a word was synonymous with another, didn't mean they meant exactly the same thing and could be used interchangeably. I would be glad when she finally took the damn ACTs again and stopped this inane use of *superfluous* synonyms.

Resuming my stride, I checked my phone again. Nothing.

The scuffle of footsteps made my ears perk up. I expected to be disappointed again, like the last two times I'd heard someone approaching. Still, I couldn't stop myself from looking up. A smile tugged at the corners of my lips.

Clay returned the gesture. He'd dressed for the heat in a fitted navy and white striped tank, salmon-colored chino shorts that hit just above his knees, and a backwards white baseball cap, with a bit of his silver hair poked out through the gap in the front.

Despite it being October, it was over eighty degrees. The smothering humidity made it feel even hotter. But that was Alabama weather. Tomorrow, we might wake up and need a sweater. We got roughly nine months of summer, one month of fall, and two months of winter—not always in that order. October was kind of a catchall month, each day a different season without warning. Fall didn't fully arrive for real until around Halloween.

Clay jogged the last few feet to close the distance between us. He laid a hand on my waist and kissed me sweetly, right on the lips. Again, surprising me with his willingness to show affection so publicly. "Sorry we're late."

"I hadn't even noticed."

Carrie snorted in amusement.

I ignored her outburst and looked past Clay. Summer gave a small wave. She wore a denim skirt and a baby blue crop top. The color looked great against her dark skin. She was even more beautiful in person than the photos I'd seen of her. Though her hair was different, much shorter and perfectly straight.

She was the reason for my nerves today. When I called Clay, inviting him to join us, he asked to bring Summer along, since they were already hanging out. I didn't really know how to feel about her as my boyfriend's ex-girlfriend, even if Clay never felt the same way about her as he did for me. He spoke so highly of her; he clearly adored her. He'd also spent a lot of time with her in the two weeks between the end of his punishment and the end of mine.

Clay stepped back to stand beside Summer, officially introducing her to me.

"It's so nice to meet you," Summer said, looking me over. This was the first time we'd been face to face. I suspected she was sizing me up every bit as much as I was her. "I feel like I know you with everything Clay's told me."

"Same," I said.

She took hold of Clay's hand, and it kind of annoyed me how they looked like the perfect couple together.

I wondered what she thought about me. Did she hold any resentment for losing her boyfriend to me? Clay said she was very supportive when he came out. I was a little jealous that she was the first person he told. Secretly, I wished it could've been me. But I suppose I understood why it wasn't. Especially since—as Clay often liked to remind me—I kept telling him he wasn't my type, because I stupidly thought that would keep him from feeling uneasy around me. I still cursed myself for ever thinking that was a good idea.

Carrie joined the group, stuffing her phone into the pocket of her camera bag. She lifted the strap over her head so it hung across her body. She looked from me to Clay to Summer. "This must be super awkward for the three of you."

Summer shook her head. "I don't think so."

Carrie scoffed. "Even though you dated him." She pointed to Clay. "Now he's dating him." Her finger jumped to me. "And he told him to break up with you."

I nudged her with my elbow. "That's not exactly how it went down." I said through gritted teeth.

"Since he's gay—" Summer pointed her thumb at Clay "—it's probably best for everyone that he broke up with me for him."

Carrie shrugged. "If you say so."

Clay brought Summer's hand up to hold it between both of his, gazing into her eyes. "I didn't break up with you *for* him. You know that, right? I didn't even know I liked him yet."

Summer pulled her hand free and slipped her arm around Clay's waist, cozying up to his side. "I know, Button. I was making a point."

I flinched. She had a pet name for my boyfriend. I tried to shake off the weirdness I was feeling about that. Why was their closeness bothering me so much? His bond with Summer was nothing more than what I had with Carrie.

"We should probably get moving." I hooked my arm through Carrie's and spun her around, pulling her through the entrance. We walked down the long path that stretched out beneath a pergola draped in flowering vines.

"You and Summer should totally grab a coffee sometime and compare notes about Clay's skills." She giggled. "I wonder if it was as good for her as you said it was for you."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I threw a glance over my shoulder to make sure Clay and Summer hadn't overheard her. They trailed way behind us, talking. Clay met my eyes and smiled.

"Relax, Emmie. It was a joke."

"Well, stop."

"Hey, baby," Clay called out.

I released my hold on Carrie, giving her a "You're on thin ice" glare as we both paused, turning back, waiting for them to catch up. "Yeah?"

"Not that this isn't beautiful—" Clay raised a hand, gesturing to our surroundings "—but what exactly are we doing here? You said you *had to* come here."

"We have to take pictures for a project we're doing together for our history class. It's a presentation about places important to local history. This is what we got assigned." I gestured around us at the garden.

"Couldn't you have just gotten pictures off the internet?" Clay asked.

"I wish." Carrie crossed her arms, jutting her hip out to the side for extra effect. "Our teacher would probably do a reverse image search to make sure we actually took them."

"That's crazy," Summer said.

"The whole point is supposed to be experiencing the historical place firsthand," I said. "It's part of the project."

Clay walked over to hook his arm around my neck. The scent of fresh sweat mixed with his sweet cologne gave me so many ideas. Even more so when he kissed my cheek. "Well, let's get to experiencing then."

As we walked, I stared at Clay until he finally looked over and said, "What?"

"You're not worried about someone seeing you kiss me, or having your arm around me? We are in public."

Without breaking our stride, Clay pulled me closer and placed a peck at the corner of my lips. "No. Not here."

"What's so special about here?"

"For one, I highly doubt anyone I know is gonna waste their Sunday at the botanical gardens."

Now I felt bad about dragging him here. Surely he would have had more fun doing whatever he'd planned with Summer. "You didn't have to come if you didn't want to."

"Hey, no. That's not what I meant. I'm very happy to be here with you. Anywhere you are, is where I want to be."

"Nice save." I peeked over at him, unable to fight off a grin.

"It's the truth."

"What's up with 'Button?'" I asked, without even bothering an attempt at a transitional topic.

Clay narrowed his eyes at me. "You mean Summer calling me that, I assume."

I nodded.

"It's just what she called me when we were together. I called her Sunny, and she called me Button. It's just one of those stupid couple things."

I turned my sight to the ground and mumbled, "You guys aren't a couple anymore."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Clay crack a smile. "Please don't tell me you're jealous of Summer."

"I dunno." I kicked at some loose pebbles on the path, sending them skittering into the flowerbeds.

"Baby, I'm *gay* ." Clay sounded exasperated. Which was justified. "I'm not into her. At all. She's just my friend."

"I know." I cuddled up closer into the crook of his arm. "And I know it's totally like Stage-Five Clinger of me, but I don't like the idea of sharing you."

Clay kissed my temple, wrapping both his arms way around my shoulders. "You're not sharing me with anyone, Em. I'm yours. Completely. Just like you're mine."

"We don't have one of those cute couple-y nickname things, though."

"I'm sure we could come up with something if you really want, but I prefer calling you baby. I never did that with a girl. It always felt super awkward. But it just fits with you."

I tried not to show the glee that answer elicited, but I was unsuccessful. "Good answer."

Clay hugged me tighter. "Thank you, baby."

A moment later, he said, "Although, I gotta say, I did like it that time you called me 'love.' You could do that more. Like, y'know, if you want. But you don't have to or anything."

I stretched over to kiss his cheek. "I'd be happy to, love."

He chewed on his bottom lip, barely concealing his delight.

All this unwarranted jealousy was probably my own insecurity and self-worth issues at play. I mean, my last boyfriend actually left me for a girl. It was possibly a bit of PTSD. But I shouldn't project my Alfie issues onto Clay. He didn't deserve that. He'd never given me reason to doubt him.

We stopped at a fork in the path. I looked over the signs listing the different gardens for each way. "Where to first?" I asked when the girls caught up.

"How about we split up?" Carrie suggested, sharing a quick glance with Summer. "You boys take the international gardens and the lake. Me and Summer can do the historic house tour, the greenhouses, and the local plant gardens. We'll knock this thing out in half the time."

"I'm cool with that," Summer said, eyeing me and Clay with a hint of a smirk.

Clay looked at me with an adorable, lopsided grin. "Baby?"

Now I felt even stupider for being jealous, because I was fairly certain Summer and Carrie had conspired to give me and Clay some alone time.

I nodded. "Sounds good to me."

"Don't forget to take plenty of pictures for the slideshow." Carrie opened her camera bag and removed a small silver digital camera from an inside pocket. She handed it to Clay. " *Do not* let him touch this. I will not have another camera broken because of butterfingers over there."

As she and Summer set off down the path to the left, I slipped my arm around Clay's waist as we walked down our path.

"What was that about?" Clay asked.

"I may have accidentally dropped her two hundred dollar camera off a balcony onto the pavement below, back in, like, eighth grade. And it may

have been irreparably damaged."

"You didn't!"

"I did. She hasn't trusted me with any of her equipment since."

Clay laughed, pulling me closer. "That's hilarious."

"She didn't think so. She barely talked to me for a whole week."

At the Spanish garden, we broke apart to take a few pictures. When I say we, I mean Clay, because there was no way I was taking responsibility for one of Carrie's cameras again. Clay looked over at me and snapped a picture, grinning at me.

"You know, this is kinda like our second date," he said, as he returned to hold me.

"Let's hope it turns out as good as the first one."

Clay nuzzled my neck, chuckling. "Play your cards right and it totally can."

"Actually," I said, laying a hand on his chest, "it's my mom's turn to work the graveyard shift at the animal clinic. She's leaving at eight and won't be back until six. You could come over. We could do things."

"I have an eight o'clock curfew on school nights. Remember? My parents would kill me and take away my car again."

"I could come to you. Say, maybe, around eleven-ish. Sneak in and just slip right back out when we're done. No one will ever know."

"Could you—could we—I don't know... like, do what we did the first time again?"

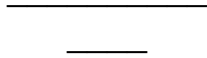
"You want to do it again?"

Clay shrugged his shoulders. "Practice makes perfect."

"True."

"And, I don't know, I kinda like the thought of you..." Clay paused as his whole face turned red. "Thinking about having you... doing that. It really turns me on."

"Then, of course, we can." I kissed his cheek. "Honestly, it really turns me on, too."



I collapsed onto a bench somewhere in the Japanese garden, drenched in sweat. We'd been walking almost nonstop, only pausing to take pictures. I groaned loud enough to startle a bird perched on a signpost nearby. It flew away with a squawk. "Why does it have to be so fucking hot?"

Clay sat beside me, laying a hand on my thigh. He somehow managed a smile. He had a light sheen of sweat across his skin that gave him a glowing, fresh, dewy look.

How the hell did he look that good in this heat? I loved him dearly, but I also kind of hated him right now for looking so damn good.

I was sure I looked a mess right now. My hair gel had melted a good twenty minutes ago, seeping down my forehead. Even though I washed my face in the bathroom, I could still feel the slimy residue, like it seeped into my pores. My hair was now plastered to my scalp with sweat. I didn't know how Clay could stand to even be near me, let alone touch me.

"Hey, love. If I faint from a heatstroke, will you carry me around for the rest of the day?" I asked, whimpering.

Clay found this hilarious. He removed his hand from my leg to put his arm around me, pulling me closer, undeterred by the excessive perspiration. He leaned in and gave me a peck on the lips. "Of course I would, baby."

A woman pushing a stroller picked up her pace as she passed by, her lips twisting into a frown when Clay kissed my temple and said, "I'd do anything for you."

For Clay's sake, I let the woman's disdain slide. There would always be people who would treat us like that, looking down on us, like what we were doing was immoral or dirty. I also knew that woman wouldn't have looked twice if that same interaction happened if it were Carrie and Jackson, or Makenzie and Dan doing it. She might even smile and think it was sweet.

I turned to look into Clay's innocent, big brown eyes. "I love you."

"I love you too," Clay said, punctuating the declaration with a gentle kiss.

Clay's body shook as he chuckled silently.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"I was just thinking. This kinda reminds me of our hike. You begged me to give you a piggyback ride back down the trail."

I laid my head on Clay's shoulder. "But you didn't. Which was so mean."

"I wanted to. I really did, but I was afraid that if I did, with my hands on your thighs to keep you up and your body rubbing against mine, we'd have a repeat of the ATV situation."

"I get it. And I was only half kidding. But that was a good day." I said.

"I was so nervous. I wanted to kiss you so many times."

"You should have."

"Yeah. I should have." Clay slowly bobbed his head up and down. "With the view and the picnic, it would've been a great first kiss story."

I lifted my head to look at him. "I think our real first kiss story is still pretty great."

Clay grinned at me, nodding. "Definitely."

"That picnic is one of the sweetest things anyone ever did for me. And somehow you keep topping it."

"I try."

"You've really spoiled me for other men. Next to you, no one will ever compare."

Clay gave a sultry, devilish look, leaning in close until his nose brushed against mine. "Then I guess my devious master plan is working."

"If you mean the one where you make me fall deeply, insanely in love with you, and never, ever want to let you go, then yeah, I'd say it's a rousing success."

"Good." Clay pressed his forehead against mine. "Because I never want to let you go either."

"I'm not going anywhere." I twisted my head to kiss Clay. "Not without you."

"I have a secret," Clay whispered.

I pulled back to examine his cheery face. "What is it?"

"I applied to nine schools in New York."

I sat up stick straight—it was the straightest I'd ever been at anything in my entire—and stared at him in shock. "When?"

"That day when you got out of the hospital. As soon as I got home from breakfast, I downloaded all the applications and filled them out. I couldn't stand the thought of not being with you. Having that be a possibility for only three weeks nearly sent me into a panic attack, but the thought of you going to New York without me, I couldn't even think about it."

"Where did you apply?"

"Well, I know it's a long shot, but I did NYU, because I know that's like your dream school. I didn't even bother with Columbia because even though I have pretty decent grades, I know I don't stand a chance there. But most of the others are like the New York college system. I forget what it's called. It's like the UCs but New York's version."

I nodded. I knew what he meant. I had a couple of those as safety schools in case NYU didn't pan out.

Too elated to care about anyone seeing us, I jumped into his lap and threw my arms around his neck. "I can't believe you did that for me."

Clay started laughing and smiling. "I did it for us."

I backed away to grip his gorgeous face between my hands. That deserved a proper kiss, which was probably a bit too intense for this place, but I didn't give a fuck. Let all the bigots glare at us. I had the sweetest man alive, and I was going to show my appreciation.

Chapter 63 - You Can't Always Get What You Want

- *Clay* -

I got startled by someone sitting in the chair next to me in the library at school on Monday afternoon. I was there to do work on a research paper for my sociology class. I was skipping lunch to finish it, because I'd totally forgotten about it over the weekend with everything going on, and it was due in my last class of the day. It was also like 15% of my final grade.

I looked up to find Duke glaring at me. "What are you doing here? Come to attack me again?"

Duke shook his head. His eyes narrowed to slits, staring me down. "You know you ruined everything between me and Emmett."

I snorted, raising a questioning brow. "How did I do that?" I turned back to my reading.

"You convinced him to break up with me."

"No, I really didn't." I highlighted a paragraph for later use.

"I want him back."

I looked up from the book, snapping the lid on my highlighter being overdramatic about it. "Good luck with that."

Duke gripped the back of my chair and glanced around quickly before leaning in so close that his face was just a few inches from mine. "If you don't break up with him, I'm going to tell everyone you're a huge flaming homo."

I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Last I checked, you also had a little fire going on yourself, buddy."

"The difference is you don't have proof."

A stab of cold fear shot through my chest. "You're bluffing."

"Am I?" Duke's lips twisted into a smirk. He took out his phone and laid it on the table, opening his photos app. He clicked on an image to enlarge it. It was me and Emmett sitting on a bench outside the hospital the day he got released. The day Duke punched me. Apparently, Duke stuck around to play paparazzi.

Duke slid his finger across the screen to switch to the next image: me and Emmett hugging.

And the next: me and Emmett kissing. It was just a brief peck, but Duke caught the exact moment our lips were pressed together.

I breathed heavily, anger bubbling just beneath the surface.

"What do you got to say to that, *buddy*?" Duke gripped my shoulder, digging his fingers into the flesh painfully.

I gritted my teeth, trying not to show the discomfort on my face. "Even if I did what you said, Emmett would never forgive you for doing this."

"Who says he has to know?" Duke pressed harder with his thumb until I buckled forward, grunting from the pressure.

I scooted my chair a few inches away, turning my body to him. "Don't you think he'd want to know why I'd break up with him after three weeks of dating?" I knew I should stop speaking, but I wanted to twist the knife in Duke. I wanted to hurt him for doing this. "Especially since we've just started having sex."

Duke blanched at that. His hard facade slipped, showing a glimpse of true hurt. But it only lasted a moment. His anger returned, harsher than before. "You're a smart guy, Clay. You'll think of something."

"Do you actually love him? Or do you just want him now because you can't have him?"

Duke shrugged. "Does it matter? Either way, it doesn't change your role in this scenario."

"It does matter, actually. A lot." I swallowed a lump in my throat. "I love him, Duke. Like for real, honest to God, love him."

Duke chuckled and tapped his hand against my cheek twice. "That's cute."

"I'm serious."

"You know what? It's a tough decision. I'll give you some time to think about it." He acted like he was being generous. As if he wasn't in control of this. Like it would happen with or without his consent. "If you haven't broken up with him by the end of the game Friday night, I'll post these lovely pictures for the entire school to see."

I pressed my lips tightly. I could feel my nostrils flaring. I wanted to punch Duke. My hand tightened around my pencil so hard it snapped in half.

Duke snickered and patted me on the back. "Just ask yourself, Clay, is being with Emmett worth the whole school knowing you're gay?" He stood up and leaned over to whisper into my ear, "Because that's the price."

"Why now?" I asked, fighting back angry tears. "You've known about us since the day after we got together. You've had nearly a month to do this. What changed?"

My question seemed to surprise him. He sat back down and laid an arm across the back of my chair. "I saw you."

"What?"

"I was at Vibrant Friday night looking for a hookup. I saw you making out with Emmett. Dancing, being happy. And I almost had that with him again. I was *this close* to getting him back." He held two fingers up an inch apart.

"Then you swooped in and stole him from me. And seeing you together just really pissed me off."

"I didn't steal him. He's not a football or a watch. He's a person. And he made a decision."

"Because he didn't know that I wanted him back. He thought I just wanted sex." He leaned in, narrowing his eyes. "Because we also had sex. Two days before your accident. Right before he hooked up with you."

"Are you trying to shock me? He already told me what happened with y'all. He also said it was a mistake, and he regrets it. And that he could never be with you again after the way you treated him last year."

"That's a goddamn lie!" He seized my collar, yanking me forward. Through gritted teeth, he said, "You're lucky we're in school right now, or I'd beat your queer little ass senseless. But then I'd get suspended and banned from the game, and I've got scouts from LSU, Auburn, Alabama, *and* Tennessee coming to watch me."

"Congratulations," I muttered. That was his dream. Once I would've cheered for him. Been ecstatic over this. Now I felt nothing.

Duke released me, pushing me back into my seat. "Tick-tock, Clay. Time's running out. What are you gonna do?" He slapped the side of my head as he stood up. "Honestly, I'm amazed nobody's called you out for being a fairy already with that ugly ass hair."

I closed my eyes, trying to keep a lid on the quiet fury building in my chest. I heard Duke's heavy footsteps retreating. I opened my eyes and looked over my shoulder in time to see him push through the exit door.

I felt the tickle of a tear roll down my cheek. Could I live with everyone knowing my secret? Or, more importantly, could I live without Emmett?

The answer to both, at this very moment, was no. How was I supposed to reconcile that? Duke made it clear. I couldn't have one without the other.

Unable to hold in my anger, I shoved everything in front of me as hard as I could, sending my books and papers flying onto the floor. I hurried to pick everything up and stuffed it all into my backpack, rushing out of the library to find somewhere to have a breakdown in private.

Chapter 64 - Under Pressure

- *Clay* -

I didn't know what to do, so I called together the only people I could turn to for help. Surrounded by my best friend, my ex-girlfriend, and my sister, I sat on my bed, hugging my knees to my chest, as I told them all what happened with Duke.

I thought about calling Emmett, too, but Duke made it clear what would happen if I told Emmett anything. So, I lied to Emmett and said I was busy this afternoon. I reasoned that it wasn't a total lie. I was busy. *Doing this* .

"That asshole!" Rachel paced the floor at the foot of my bed, arms crossed. "I could murder him for this."

"It's seriously twisted," Summer added. She was sitting beside me, her hand resting on my knee.

Jackson, slumped in the desk chair, sighed. "I told you he'd do something like this. It's just who he is."

Rachel whirled around to face Jackson. "Who he is, is a guy who's going to have my steel-toed motorcycle boot shoved up his ass."

"What do I do?" I asked, looking at each of them. "He only gave me till Friday to decide."

"You have to tell Emmett," Summer said flatly.

I shook my head. "If I tell Emmett, he'll confront Duke, and Duke will out me for spite, because I don't think Emmett would be with someone who'd do something like that."

Summer put her hand on my face to force me to look at her. "He deserves to know."

"I agree," Rachel said, hands on hips. She looked fierce, even in pigtails. "That dickhead shouldn't get away with this."

I looked at Jackson. "What do you think?"

"I got your back, bro. Whatever you decide, I'll be there."

That was sweet, but completely unhelpful.

I took a deep breath. "I don't know if I can handle having everyone know about me. Emmett told me this awful story about getting beat up in ninth grade after some guys found out he's gay."

Jackson sat forward, pressing his hands to his knees. "If anybody tries to lay a finger on you, I'll kick their ass."

Rachel moved to sit beside me, leaning her head on my shoulder. "Me, too. I'm not afraid to cut a bitch."

"Thanks," I said.

It was a thoughtful gesture, but Jackson couldn't stay by my side 24/7. And Rachel barely reached the minimum height requirements for the Ferris wheel at the fair every year. She might be ferocious, but she was a pipsqueak. A chihuahua barking at dobermans.

There was a knock at my bedroom door. Dad stuck his head in. "Bean, didn't your mother tell you to unload the dishwasher?"

Rachel turned to him. "I'll do it in a minute, Dad. I've got serious business to deal with first."

I rolled my eyes as Dad stepped inside. I didn't want to bring my parents into this. If Mom found out, she'd go to the school, or worse, to Duke's parents. And Dad could never keep a secret from her.

Dad looked around at us. Jackson and Summer both came in through the back door in my room. I doubted my parents even knew they were here.

"What's going on?" Dad asked. He seemed appropriately worried.

"Just drama," I said.

"Is it Emmett? Are you boys having problems?"

"It's nothing like that. Me and Emmett are solid."

He threw another glance around the room. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I didn't have to tell him everything. I could just reveal the important bits without bringing Duke into it. "I'm trying to decide if I'm ready to come out. More publicly. Like in a way that the whole school would find out." I paused to gauge Dad's reaction. When he did nothing more than nod, I asked, "What do you think?"

"I think that's a very personal choice, and only you can know if you're ready for it. But you know me and your mom are here for you, and we fully support any choice you make."

I nodded. I didn't really expect much else. "Thanks, Dad."

"Either way, I want you to know I'm proud of you, son."

I smiled.

Dad looked at Rachel. "When you're done here, the dishes await."

"Yes, sir," Rachel grumbled.

Once Dad left, I looked around at them. They all knew, and they still loved me. When I came out to my mom, she told me that if my friends couldn't accept my sexuality, they weren't real friends. Maybe it was time to test that theory.

"I think I know what I have to do." I released a heavy sigh. "But first I have to talk to Emmett."

Chapter 65 - So It Goes...

- *Emmett* -

On Tuesday afternoon, I was lying in bed, watching a movie, when Clay walked in. I sat up, excited by the unexpected drop-in. "Hey, love. If I'd known you were coming, I would've got myself all prettified for you."

Clay sat on the bed and leaned forward. The kiss was brief, his lips rigid against mine. "You don't ever have to do anything extra to make me want you."

I chuckled. "It was a joke."

Clay forced a laugh. His face was full of tension. It formed a line between his brows. The corners of his lips were hard set. His brown eyes held a darkness that didn't suit him.

I wondered what had happened between Sunday night and now to make him look this distraught. I thought everything went great with our rendezvous.

I scooted forward and took Clay's hand. "What's going on?"

"I love you. Let me start with that."

"That's good," I said, though it didn't sound good at all. That was not a comforting way for your boyfriend to start a conversation. "Because I love you, too."

"Would you—" Clay took a deep breath, turning his eyes to the rug. "Would it be okay if everyone knew I loved you?"

"I guess. Theoretically. Sure."

Clay's solemn eyes met mine. "Not theoretically. *Actually* . What if everyone found out about us? Would you be okay with that?"

"Does everyone know?" I drew out the syllables of each word, trying to understand what was going on. I was very confused. As far as I knew, he had only told a handful of people. I didn't think any of them would spread it around.

"Not yet. But they might soon." Clay seemed to rethink that, because he added, "They will."

I let out a bout of laughter, still baffled by this conversation. "Are you going on the news to declare your love for me or something?"

"It's not quite that epic, but it will definitely get around. Maybe even to your school."

The more he spoke the less I understood.

"Okay, stop." I waved my cast between us. "What the hell are you talking about, Clay? I'm a little freaked out. And your face is not helping matters."

Clay gripped my hand tighter, laying his other hand on top of it. "Duke has a picture of us kissing. He says he's going to post it everywhere if I don't break up with you. But I can't do that. I'd rather have every Bible-thumping bigot in town chasing me with pitchforks and torches than give you up."

I shook my head, sorting through Clay's mad rambling in my mind. That was a lot of information he'd just dumped into my lap. "Explain, please. With detail."

Clay told the long version of the story. The pictures, the ultimatum, and the consequences.

"I've made my decision," Clay said. "I don't want to hide from this. It's who I am, and I don't want to feel ashamed of it. But since it affects you, too, I had to clear it with you. I mean, I'd understand if you don't want everyone

to know." Clay's eyes had gone glassy. "I'm sure if we broke up, Duke would keep your part in it a secret. I don't think he'd hurt you like that."

"Fuck him! Fuck his blackmail! Fuck it all!"

The corners of his lips twitched. He looked like he wanted to smile, but was afraid of it. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

I stretched my arms out wide. "Let the whole fucking world know for all I care. I'm not losing you because my dickwad of an ex-boyfriend can't get over being dumped. Because, honestly, even if I wasn't with you, I wouldn't be with him. I mean, I only hooked with him because I was so upset that I couldn't be with you. I was fantasizing about you the whole time I was sleeping with him, anyway."

"You were?" Clay seemed pleased to hear that.

"Yes," I said. I thought I'd told him that already, but maybe he forgot. Or maybe he didn't believe me before.

Clay shook his head. "Well, I have a plan to nullify his scheme, and maybe piss him off a little in the process. If you're interested."

"Definitely."

"I need to warn you, though. It will be very public. And once we do it, there's no going back."

I took Clay's hand in mine, pressing my lips to his. "I'm all in, baby."

Chapter 66 - What's On My Mind

- *Clay* -

As promised, after school on Wednesday, I made my way downtown to have an appointment with a new therapist. If this hadn't been a stipulation of getting my car back, I would've bailed. This was an hour I could spend with Emmett, rather than a stranger.

The shrink looked at his watch, then over at me. Beyond the basic introductory, hi-how-are-yous and such, I hadn't done much talking. I'd spent several minutes admiring his very impressive thick black beard, which he kept immaculately shaped and lined up. "We've been sitting here in silence for almost fifteen minutes, Clay. Don't you have anything you want to talk about? It doesn't even have to be relating to your anxiety."

He was getting paid regardless, so I didn't see why he cared. I doubted he had a genuine interest in my well-being. Maybe if I'd been a patient for more than twenty minutes. But he didn't know me. I was a name on a file to him.

"What else is there?" I asked. "That's why I'm here, right?"

My gaze bounced around the room. It looked like it belonged in someone's house, not the eighth floor of a random office building downtown. The view of downtown outside the large windows, framed by heavy brown curtains, did not match the interior. It felt like an optical illusion. All the furniture was comfortable, lived in—nothing like the stark modern decor of my last therapist. I suspected the comfy couch and the warm earth tones were meant to make people comfortable. To help them open up. Like they were talking to a friend in their living room.

"Your anxiety is not your whole life. You're a puzzle, and that's just one piece of the full picture," Dr. Singh said. "You could tell me about school, your friends, your family."

"I like your suit." I scanned the man's outfit. Burgundy trousers and a crisp pink button-down, with a fuchsia tie and suspenders. A matching burgundy coat hung on the back of his leather desk chair across the room. Emmett would love the ensemble.

"Thank you." He brushed a hand across his pants leg, as if to clear off lint. "I thought it was nice."

"You don't worry what people will think about you wearing that?"

"Not really. I liked it so I bought it." He looked me over. My tattered jeans—which I bought that way—my boring white t-shirt from Ralph Lauren with their signature polo player's silhouette, and my favorite Nikes. I was very boring in contrast with him. "Do you worry people will judge you for how you look?"

"Everyone judges everyone for how they look."

"Hmm." He nodded. "But you still did that." His eyes jumped to my silver hair. The only thing about me that stuck out.

"Maybe I'm sick of caring. They're just going to judge, anyway. It might as well be for something that makes me happy."

"That's a good way to look at it," Dr. Singh said.

"I guess."

"So, I read your file. A bit about your history. How this all started for you."

So much for not talking about my anxiety. Maybe he assumed I would open up now that he'd got me talking.

"No offense, Doc, but I don't want to talk about my dead dad. There's only one person I feel comfortable talking to about that outside my family, and you ain't him." I detested the word *ain't*—I heard it at least ten times a day—but I felt it worked better to get my point across.

Dr. Singh crossed his legs and leaned his head on his hand, framing his narrow face with his thumb and forefinger. "Do you mind if I ask who this mystery man is?"

I debated whether I should answer. I wasn't thrilled with the idea of letting a stranger know my sexuality right off the bat. Then again, once I implemented my plan, it wouldn't be a secret much longer, so why the hell not? As usual, I felt a sizable pit in my stomach. Surely the size of a golf ball, at least.

"You look conflicted," Dr. Singh said.

"Maybe I am."

"No one gets to know what you say in here, Clay. Not even your parents. It's between you, me, and my notebook. The only way I can divulge information about you is if I think you're a danger to yourself or others. Which I don't believe you are."

My mother told me she got this guy's information from the mom of another queer teen, so maybe I could let him in on this one part of my life. "The mystery man is my boyfriend."

"You have a boyfriend?" His inflectionless voice held no clue to his thoughts on the matter. He wrote something down without looking away from me. "That's nice. How long have you been dating?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Our timeline is kinda messy."

"How so?"

"We started as friends, and I sorta fell really hard for him, really fast. Um, I thought I was straight... or something, but I know I'm not now." I shook my head. That was irrelevant to the question. "Anyway, we finally admitted our feelings, maybe like a month ago. We've been boyfriends ever since. Although there was a grounding situation that made it difficult for us to really be together until last Friday, when we had our first official date."

"Has your coming to terms with your sexuality caused your anxiety to worsen?"

"What do you think?" I said, a bit too petulantly.

"I want to know what you think."

"Obviously! Or my mom wouldn't have forced me to come here."

The doctor nodded. "Are you still questioning your feelings, your identity?"

"Not really. No. I know that I'm gay."

"It's okay to be unsure."

"Well, I really enjoy having sex with my boyfriend, if that clears anything up for you."

He chuckled. "You don't have to be gay to enjoy sex with men. You could be bisexual, pansexual—"

I raised a hand, showing him my palm. "I'm going to stop you before you name the whole acronym. I'm gay, Doc. I've had sex with girls. I didn't like it. It felt boring and tedious. I always felt disappointed... dissatisfied."

"Perhaps you require an emotional connection to feel pleasure with your partner."

"I've had several girlfriends, and I had deep feelings for most of them. I'd go so far as to say I think I loved a couple of them. I definitely loved my last girlfriend; she's one of my favorite people. But it was a platonic love. I never felt a physical attraction to her or any other girl. I didn't want her the way I way I wanted Emmett—that's my boyfriend. And that started almost immediately, before I even really knew him. Five days after we met, I started having fantasies about giving him a handjob in the woods, which is not as kinky as it sounds if you knew the context."

I hadn't meant to say that last part out loud. "Sorry. That's probably more information than you wanted or needed."

He waved a hand toward me. "This is your time. Say whatever you want to say."

"Well, stuff like that never happened with any girl I've dated or pursued." I shrugged my shoulder up to my ear. "Not that I ever did much pursuing. They mostly came to me, asked me out."

"I see."

"The most I ever wanted from girls was to be their friend."

"It's okay to feel like that."

"But my friends... they all had girlfriends by seventh grade. I knew I didn't want one, but I felt like I had to have one to fit in... or something. It's stupid kid bullshit, and I wish I'd never done it. Maybe I would've figured myself out sooner."

"It's possible." Dr. Singh puckered his lips as he wrote something down on his notepad. "Did you ever have feelings for any boys before Emmett?"

"I didn't think so when I first met him. But recently I keep remembering stuff."

"Like what?"

"Stupid little things that should have been a clue. Like in the locker room before and after gym, I felt really embarrassed and I would not look anywhere but straight into my locker. Because I was worried someone might catch me looking around and think I was gay and that deeply terrified me." I pushed a hand through my hair, blowing out a breath. "How did that not tip me off?"

"You didn't want to know, and your brain complied," Dr. Singh said.

"Denial can affect the way we remember things, making our memories unreliable. Over time, those memories can take the form of the story we wish we'd lived, rather than the truth of the events. We omit some details

and fabricate others to fit our narrative. The brain is very powerful that way. It blocks off things it doesn't think we're ready to deal with."

I nodded. That definitely struck a chord. "I totally blocked out a guy I had a crush on."

"Tell me about that."

"I mean, I didn't fully block him out. Just my feelings for him." I brushed my hands up and down the legs of my jeans. "See, I went to camp every summer from the age of like nine until I was thirteen. I guess my mom thought getting me out of the house into the fresh air would make me be less sad about my dad at first. And then I loved it and kept going back."

"And what about the boy?"

"His name was Jacob. He was my camp counselor for my last two summers there. He was in charge of my cabin both years. He had to be about sixteen... seventeen, something like that. I remember he had a car—a black mustang with white racing stripes—and he'd show me pictures and talk to me about all this car shit I had no clue about, but it was Jacob, so I listened to it like it was fucking Shakespeare."

Dr. Singh chuckled.

I took a deep breath, and explained all the things I'd done to get close to Jacob, to receive his praise, just to get a few bro-hugs and some high-fives and maybe a "You're a cool kid."

I told him about Jacob getting a girlfriend and how it made me feel. How devastated I was. "And it's so stupid, but when our cabin won a relay race, *thanks to me*, Jacob just patted me on the back and went to kiss *her*."

"How did that make you feel?"

"It pissed me off. I trained so hard that summer and forced my bunk mates to train just to make him proud of me. Then he barely even cared. That

night, I punched one of my bunk mates in the face. Honestly, I forget what the kid did, or what he said to make me so mad."

"You were angry at Jacob and you lashed out at your bunk mate. It's classic transference."

"Duh!"

Dr. Singh snickered at the outburst, but quickly regained composure and asked, "Why didn't you go back to camp after that summer?"

"For a while I told myself that I'd outgrown it. But the truth is I didn't want to see Jacob again. I guess I thought he'd be with that girl who I'd seen around camp for years. Or maybe he would've moved on to someone new. Someone else to take his attention from me."

It suddenly occurred to me, I'd done something similar with Emmett. All those months of wanting him, only to have him hook up with Duke, made me so angry. But maybe Duke wasn't the real target of my ire. I think I may have been angry at Emmett for that and transferred all that onto Duke. Duke had done plenty since then to deserve my fury, just not that. Although I couldn't justify that anger toward Emmett either, since I was holding back my feelings. Maybe that's why I kept throwing it in Emmett's face that he'd outright denied feelings for me, making us both suffer. If he hadn't rejected me so many times, maybe I would have told him sooner. Maybe he never would have fallen back in with Duke. Then this whole mess never would've gotten started. But again, it wasn't fair to place all the blame on him. I played my part in the damage.

"Now, you said you blocked Jacob from your memory. Why do *you* think you did that?" The doctor asked the question the way a teacher does who already has the answer, putting extra emphasis on the first *you*, making his intentions crystal clear.

" *I* think I did it because I was afraid of how much I liked him. Somewhere, subconsciously, I must have known what was happening. I mean, I wasn't a moron, or like fucking Amish. I knew gay people existed. But I guess that wasn't a thing I thought of as acceptable for me."

"Why would you think that?"

I got a bit choked up. I knew the answer to that question. It came to me as soon as he asked it. So I told him: "There was a boy I went to school with. He was very feminine. His name was Isaiah. He wore a lot of 'girly' colors." I put air quotes around the word, because I'd always thought gendering colors was stupid. "He also liked music and movies and TV shows that are generally considered girl stuff. And he always pretended to be someone like Wonder Woman, Black Widow, or Supergirl when all the kids wanted to play superhero. Which I understood. They're all awesome. And Supergirl is one of the strongest characters in the universe. Why wouldn't you want to be her playing against doofuses pretending to be Hawkeye? She shoots fucking lasers out of her eyes. She'd wipe that son of a bitch out in two seconds."

"She's awesome. I can't argue with that."

"Um, anyway, in second grade, he brought in a Holiday Barbie that was still in the box, for show and tell. He was so excited."

The corner of my mouth quirked up, recalling Isaiah's beaming face as he stood at the head of the class, showing her off. I don't know why, but this memory stood out in stark clarity. So much brighter than so many others from my childhood that meant a lot more to me. "He talked about how her dress was his favorite shade of purple and how he loved her sparkly crown, which looked like real diamonds, and her silk cape with all these beads on the trim."

My smile faded as I recalled what happened next. "At recess that day, someone had taken the Barbie out of the box and brought it outside. Some boys from my class started teasing Isaiah about it. They played keep-away. You know, the game where kids throw things over another kid's head to stop him from getting it."

Dr. Singh gave a deadpan stare worthy of Jim Halpert. "I know what keep-away is, Clay. I'm pretty sure they've been playing it since the dawn of time."

"Right. Sorry." I shook my head. That was so stupid. Of course, he knew what it was. "Uh, so, some of the older kids, they saw this and came over. One of my classmates told one of the older kids—who I think maybe was his brother—about Isaiah's Barbie and what he said in class. Then the two big kids joined in, picking on him, kinda pushing him around the circle of boys. The big brother said if Isaiah liked the dress so much, he should get one for himself, because he'd obviously rather be a girl. I mean, it was hardly clever or particularly biting comments, but we were only like eight or nine, and that shit still hurts. You know?"

Dr. Singh nodded. "Mm-hmm."

"One of the big kids threw the Barbie in a mud puddle. When Isaiah started crying, the boy from my class, who started it all, pushed him down, and I think he scraped his knee or something because a teacher took Isaiah away. He was still crying when he got back to class."

"That's terrible."

I grabbed the throw pillow beside me and hugged it to my chest as my heart raced. Though I didn't know why. This happened a decade ago. "I remember the school called Isaiah's dad, and he came and took Isaiah into the hall to talk to him. Only the door didn't close all the way and my seat was right there next to the door, so I heard his dad berating him, because I guess the Barbie was his sister's, and he was supposed to bring in this fire truck that his dad had bought him just for this day so he'd have something he could show proudly. And I remember thinking that was such an odd thing to say, because Isaiah was so proud of that Barbie before she got messed up. The dad kept his voice really low the whole time, but I remember he sounded so angry. And he asked, 'Why do you have to be like this?'"

"What did Isaiah say?" Dr. Singh asked.

"He didn't say anything. His dad grabbed his arm, said that they'd talk about it at home, and dragged him down the hall."

"What does that story have to do with you, Clay?"

I lifted my eyes to meet his. "What do you mean?"

"I asked why you thought being gay was not acceptable *for you* when you were thirteen. All that negativity came from one incident where a little boy brought a Barbie to school?"

I shrugged. "I don't even know if Isaiah was really gay, or if he just liked Barbies and pretty dresses, but that was just the start of it. He was tormented for the next five years. In seventh grade, someone left a dildo in his gym locker with a note that said, 'I hope you choke on this and die.' I mean, where does a thirteen-year-old even get a dildo." I picked at my nails. "After that, his mom pulled him out of school. I never saw him again."

"Were you sad when he left?"

I stared at him, confused. "I didn't even know him. I don't think I said more than ten words to him in the entire time we went to school together."

"Were you perhaps afraid that people would think you were like him if you hung out with him? Then maybe they would've treated you the way they treated him?"

" *Maybe* ." The word came out as a croak. I cleared my throat, hoping to resolve the issue.

"So, you feel like Isaiah and all that he went through was the reason you repressed your sexuality?"

"Among other things. Little things. Stupid things."

"Like what?"

"This one time, my best friend Jackson and me were watching a show on his laptop. We were in his room and just laying across the bed, like we always did, and his older brother came in right around the time that one of the guys on the show—who's bisexual—started kissing another guy. Well, Lucas freaked out about it, and started shouting at us." I started jabbing my finger in the air to mimic Lucas' actions, lowering my voice to repeat the

words, "*Why the fuck are you watching that faggy shit? I better not ever catch you doing anything queer like that or I'll beat you bloody, you little perverts .*"

"Lucas sounds like an asshole."

I laughed. "I didn't think therapists could say stuff like that."

"Only when it's the truth. And he's not my patient."

"He is *such* an asshole," I said. "When he finds out I'm gay, I'm positive he'll tell Jackson he better not see me again."

"Are you worried Jackson will listen to him?"

"Heh! Hell no." I shook my head vehemently, grinning at the absurdity of that question. "Jackson hates Lucas."

"Correct me if I'm wrong; I assume you haven't come out to many people."

"A few. My parents, my sister, Jackson, my ex-girlfriend—the one I said I love. And, of course, my boyfriend Emmett. Emmett told me his friends also know, but he trusts them, and I trust him."

"How do you feel when you think about coming out to more people?"

"Scared."

"Understandable."

I picked at my fingernails, making one of them jagged. "And maybe... maybe a little excited."

Dr. Singh smiled. "That's good. Can you elaborate on that?"

"If I was out, I could love Emmett the way I want. I could treat Emmett the way everyone else gets to treat the person they love. Holding hands, hugging, kissing. I can't do that if I keep hiding."

"But sometimes it's not safe to be who you are. Hiding it is acceptable if it's for your own protection. If you think you might be in danger from revealing your identity, it might be best to hold it in until you can go somewhere safer."

"I'm not sure that's true for me."

"Why?"

"Emmett is out. And apart from an incident that happened four years ago, he says it's mostly fine. Maybe some name calling, but I can handle that."

"Okay. Well, we've talked about the excitement. Now tell me about the fear. Is it fear of the reaction? Of ending up like Isaiah?"

I nodded, still picking at my nail, trying to smooth out the edge. "I've had the same group of friends more or less for most of my life, and I'm afraid they'll become like those bullies who went after Isaiah. They'll be like Lucas. Because a lot of people here are like that."

"And a lot of people aren't. The people you've come out to all still love you, right?"

"Yes, but that was dumb luck. How do you tell the difference?"

"Sometimes it's hard. Sometimes you just have to trust your gut. You chose most of these people to be in your life, so have faith that you're a good judge of character."

"Because *that's* easy."

He nodded his head to the side, acknowledging my statement. "If they don't accept you, you don't have to continue your friendship with them. Keeping toxic people in your life, just because they've always been there, is not a healthy way to live. You just have to leave that behind sometimes and take care of yourself first. You take what you learned from that situation and try not to make the same mistake twice."

"I've sort of already done that with someone."

"Tell me about that."

"He was my friend. A very good friend, for a long time. But he used to date Emmett, and he still has feelings for him."

"That can be tough."

I explained the situation with Duke and my plan for what to do about it.

"What do you think?"

"I think you should be sure this is something you want to do. Really consider it, and think about all the ways it could go wrong, so that you're prepared if it does."

"I don't know that I have a choice."

"You do. It's just not a favorable one."

"If the choices are to be miserable and lonely with my secret intact, or to be with the boy I love and risk being the target for hateful dickheads, then I don't see a choice. Not for me. The only way through this for me is the one that keeps Emmett in my life. Fuck the consequences."

"That's brave. But I still would advise you think on it more."

"Sorry, Doc. I made up my mind already. I just wanted to know your thoughts, maybe see if you could say something I hadn't considered yet. But you didn't."

"It's your life, Clay. And you have to live it the way that suits you best. If you say this is the only option for you, then I respect that."

"Don't worry about it. Even if they all hate me, I've only got seven months left in my senior year. Then I never have to see these people again if I don't want to."

The timer on the doctor's desk beeped. He turned and pressed the button to stop it. "That's our hour."

"Already?"

"You can come back if you want. This appointment was sort of an audition."

"So I made the cut?"

"I think the better question would be, did I make the cut? I was the one auditioning for you. To make sure I was the right fit for you. Sometimes people need to lie on a few therapists' couches to find the one that's most comfortable and relaxing for them."

"I didn't lay on the couch."

"It's a metaphor, Clay."

I snorted. "Maybe I am a moron."

"Well, if you like, we can set up another appointment and discuss that possibility then."

"Sure thing, Doc."

We both stood up at the same time. Dr. Singh let out a groan as he did so. He extended his hand to me. "I hope things work out with your plan."

I shook the man's hand. "I hope so, too."

As I headed for the door, Dr. Singh pointed out a door on the other side of the room. "That door leads to the main hall if you'd rather make a quick getaway."

"Emmett's actually waiting in your lobby for me. He wanted to be here for moral support."

"That's sweet."

"He loves me. And that's why I can't give him up without a fight so easily."

Dr. Singh clapped me on the back. "Trust me. I've been married for twenty-two years. I understand."

He opened the door to the lobby for me.

Emmett was the only person in the room. He jumped up, his lips stretching into a grin. "How was it?"

"Enlightening." I walked over and took Emmett's hand, giving him a kiss on the cheek. Even if someone saw us, it's not like it would be a secret for much longer.

The doctor followed me into the lobby. "Emmett. It's nice to put a face to the name."

"You talked about me?" Emmett glanced at me, then at the doctor, and back again. "I'm not sure if that's good or bad."

"Don't even, baby!" I bumped my shoulder against Emmett's. "You know I gushed about you."

"Did he?" Emmett asked the doctor.

Dr. Singh raised his hands out to the side. "Doctor/patient confidentiality prohibits me from confirming or denying that statement."

Emmett leaned against me. "I guess I'll just have to trust you."

"Trust him that hath not once broken faith, baby," I said.

Emmett's mouth dropped open. "That's not the quote, but I love you so much for even knowing that butchered version."

"I know the quote, Emmett. It was... a remix, if you will."

"Remixing Shakespeare? God, you're so sexy right now."

I laughed, though my cheeks were getting flushed having the doctor standing right next to me.

"I think that's my cue to give you leave." Dr. Singh gave a slight bow as he if he were one of Shakespeare's players exiting the stage. "Don't be a stranger, Clay. I want to hear how your plan works out."

I nodded. "I'll tell my mom to set up another appointment."

The doctor waved over his shoulder as he walked back into his office. "I'm on pins and needles, my friend."

Despite his dry tone, I weirdly actually believed him.

After the doctor closed his office door, Emmett kissed me on the lips, wrapping his arms around my neck. "So, how do you know a quote from *Henry VI*?"

With our arms around each other, we walked out into the hallway. "I may or may not have memorized a few notable quotes to toss out at a moment's notice to impress you. Although the one's I memorized haven't come in handy yet."

"Throw me a couple, and you might get lucky tonight."

I pressed the button to call the elevator. "'A fool doth think he is wise, but a wise man knows he is a fool.'"

Emmett tilted his head, squinting one eye. "Not quite, but close enough for at least third base."

"Ooh!" I squeezed him tighter as the elevator dinged and the doors spilt down the middle, opening to allow us entrance into the tiny mirrored box. "I have a good one, I think, but I was trying to save it for the perfect moment."

Emmett raised his hand out to the side as I pressed the lobby button. His cast had so much writing on it now—mostly quotes. Mixed among that were several more drawings to go along with Eeyore, including one of Kiki on her broomstick. Apparently, his friend Dan drew that one, since Carrie couldn't draw people well. "Lay it on me."

"You'll be the one laying it on me in a second."

"I like the confidence," Emmett said. "What are you waiting for?"

I stared into his beautiful green eyes. Not even the elevator's fluorescent bulbs could dull their shine. "'Doubt thou the stars are fire; doubt that the sun doth move; doubt truth to be a liar; but never doubt that I love.'" I kissed his cheek. "I love you."

"Holy fuck! You were right." Emmett crashed against me to kiss me. Then he started laughing. "That's like one of my favorite quotes."

I wrapped my arms around his waist. "Do I get extra points for knowing it's from *Hamlet*?"

"You're gonna get some extra something as soon as we're alone for real."

Chapter 67 - Friends Will Be Friends

- *Clay* -

I turned off the engine of the car. I paused, closing my eyes, to take a deep breath. I'd put this part off for as long as I could. The game was tomorrow night. It was now or never.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Emmett asked. "Once you're out, you're out. Like you said, there's no going back."

I looked over at him and smiled. "I know."

"Maybe I can go to Alfie. Convince him not to go through with it."

"No." I shook my head. "You aren't doing that. I'm not giving him the satisfaction of either of us begging him. He'll always be able to hold this over us." I reached over to cup Emmett's cheek in my hand. "Besides, I've been hiding for months. I'm tired of it."

Emmett gripped my hand, pulling it over to his lips, pressing them into my palm. "Well, I'm right here."

I looked out through the front windshield at Brandon's house. Jackson's car sat in the circle driveway in front of Tyler's filthy truck. Jackson texted to tell me they were all here, so I assumed Mark had caught a ride with one of them since he didn't have a car of his own.

If I was going to out myself to the entire school, I felt like I needed to tell them first. They were my friends. They deserved to know without being blindsided. I was also curious to see their first reaction.

"Do you want me to wait out here?" Emmett asked as I opened my door to get out.

"No." I reached over to hold his hand, gripping his fingers tight. "I'm gonna need all the support I can get. I'm kinda terrified that they'll react badly."

As we walked up the wide steps to the front door, Emmett rubbed my back. "Well, at least you know you've got Jackson on your side already."

Lucia, Brandon's housekeeper, answered the door. Having known me for years, she didn't bother greeting me. She just said, "Brandon is in the den."

I thanked the woman and gestured for Emmett to follow.

The hallways seemed much longer than they ever had, the vaulted ceiling higher. Everything seemed too large.

The painted dead eyes of the portraits followed my every step, judging me for daring to love another boy, and bringing that boy into this temple of conservatism and "traditional family values." They supported every gun-toting loon who entered the political arena. They might as well have NRA, white Jesus, and Pro-Life stamped on their family crest.

I startled when Emmett rubbed his hand along my back between my shoulder blades. "You can do this." he whispered.

I wiped away the nervous sweat from my upper lip and forced a smile.

I entered the den to find my friends gathered around the pool table. Brandon made a shot that sank two balls into the pocket. "Ha! Suck my cock, bitches."

The other three groaned and grumbled with irritation. It wasn't his foul mouth that bothered them. Brandon always talked like that. It was the rubbing his victories in everyone's faces.

"Who's winning?" I asked.

They all looked over, surprised. They also threw curious glances at Emmett beside me. Emmett hadn't been in the same place with all of them at one time since the ATV track. That was almost three months ago now.

"Me, obviously." Brandon said, laying his pool cue on the table. "So Jackson says you have something to tell us."

"He's been super encryptic about it." Tyler added.

Brandon grunted, "Moron," under his breath.

They abandoned their game, congregating on the leather couches arranged around the wood-burning fireplace. A giant stuffed moose head hung above the mantle, which displayed a collection of photos of Brandon with his dad and his three older brothers posing with a series of dead animals that they'd hunted. The pictures always made me queasy, especially the one of Brandon at ten with his first deer, blood streaked across his face to commemorate his first kill. The glass cabinet filled with guns that lined the back wall didn't help my nerves, either.

"He wouldn't tell us what it is," Mark said. "Only that it's important and that we need to hear you out."

When Mark propped his feet on the coffee table, Brandon kicked his ankles and glared at him. "Were you raised in a goddamn barn? That thing cost four thousand dollars. My dad had it custom made from African wood or some shit like that."

Brandon ignored Mark's sour face and turned to me. "What's this big news, Clay?"

Tyler snorted, laughing. "Did you knock up Summer?"

I let out a strained laugh. "Not even close."

"Guys!" Jackson snapped. "Just let him tell it."

I offered him a grateful smile. Jackson nodded, putting his arms up on the back of the sofa that he had all to himself.

I picked at a hangnail on my thumb, trying to figure out where to start. It came loose, leaving a line of blood in the corner of my nail.

"Clay?" Brandon sat forward, concern drawing his brows down in the center. "Are you okay?"

Emmett finally moved from where he'd planted himself by the door. He came over to put a hand on my shoulder. Brandon, Mark, and Tyler all shared looks.

I felt like the Tin Man with rusted joints as I turned my head. That small movement seemed to take extra effort.

Emmett smiled and nodded. Adoration written all over his face. He didn't have to say anything. I just understood that he was letting me know he loved me.

I took a deep breath and faced my friends. Emmett gave me the inspiration I needed. "Y'all are like my brothers. You always have been. I love you guys."

"Seriously, Clay. You're kinda freaking me out here." Brandon said.

Shifting my weight from one foot to other and back again, I scratched the back of my neck where the hairs prickled with my growing anxiety. I kept my eyes fixed on the antler chandelier hanging above us, unable to look at them. My breathing stuttered. "Um... so, Emmett... Emmett isn't just... he's not just my friend." I turned my eyes to the rug. "He's my buh... He's m-m-my boyfriend."

Emmett slipped his hand into mine, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

I finally looked at them. "We're dating."

"Fucking hell, Clay!" Brandon blew out a heavy sigh, brushing his hand over his face and through his blond hair. "Is that all? You had me thinking you had a fucking brain tumor. I thought you were gonna say you have like a month to live. Fuck!"

A relieved laugh bubbled out of me. "Nope. No. Totally healthy. And, you know—" I shrugged, trying for a casualness that I did not feel "— *gay*."

Brandon stood up and walked over to stand in front of me. He looked Emmett over before turning his gaze to meet mine. "Honestly, I did kinda wonder about you guys. I just didn't want to say anything in case I was wrong."

That had me taken aback. He was the first person to say that. That made me curious. "What made you wonder?"

"I dunno." Brandon shrugged. "The handful of times I've seen y'all together, you both always stare at each other. Not to mention the fact that you're *always* together. Every time I call you to hang out, you're with him. And you touch each other a lot. Like *a lot*, a lot. If it's not your hands, it's your shoulders, or your legs. And you walk so close together, like you want to touch, but you're, like, afraid or something."

I did not know it was that obvious. I thought I'd hidden it well. Emmett certainly didn't seem to know. Although Brandon had a point. I used any excuse I could find to touch Emmett, even if only for a moment.

"I did try to ask you about it once," Brandon said, "but you didn't seem to get what I was saying, so I dropped it. I figured you'd say something eventually if it was real."

"The arcade," I said, recalling our weird conversation in Brandon's truck. "When you asked if I knew he was gay? You've suspected it for that long?"

Brandon nodded.

"Is that why you came after me that day at the pond? When Mark said my hair was gay."

"I didn't say your hair was gay. I said talking about it was." He sounded defensive, then he shrunk back against the couch cushions, folding his arms together. "But, I mean, I'm sorry about that, I guess."

Brandon ignored Mark and said, "Yeah. I hoped we could talk about it then. But you looked so freaked out and scared, so I gave you an excuse to pretend it wasn't what it was."

"Thank you." I appreciated that. Because I was freaking out that day. I might have fainted if he told me he knew then.

"How long have you been gay?" Tyler asked. He looked like he was doing mental math.

Brandon cut a harsh glare at him, making him shrink back into the couch. "Fucking halfwit."

"I didn't figure it out until I met Emmett," I answered, feeling slightly bad for Tyler. Brandon was always picking on him. "And before you ask, I'm not bisexual. I've never been into girls. I only started dating because all you guys did, and I felt left out or something. Honestly, I didn't even know I was into guys before I met Emmett. I thought I just wasn't into anything. But I think I always have been, I just didn't want to accept it."

"Why are you telling us this now?" Mark asked. His face was unreadable. I wondered what he was thinking.

Before I could answer Mark, Brandon asked, "How come you didn't invite Duke? Does he already know, like Jackson?"

I looked at Emmett and back at Brandon. "Duke knows. He's kinda the reason I'm telling you."

"What does that mean?" Mark asked, suddenly curious. Duke was his best friend.

"Duke said he's going to out me." I explained the situation as best as I could without telling them Duke's motives. Despite his betrayal, I refused to do to him what he was threatening to do to me. That's why I declined Emmett's offer to, in his words, "pull an Uno reverse on that son of a bitch" and blackmail Duke with all the texts and DMs he'd sent Emmett throughout their relationship. I couldn't do it. It wasn't right under any circumstances.

Brandon's face turned harsh. "So, why the fuck aren't we on our way to kick Duke's ass right now? That's so not cool."

"Why is Duke doing this?" Tyler asked. He took his hat off and scratched his buzzed head.

"Holy shit, Ty!" Brandon stared at Tyler, shaking his head. "You actually asked an intelligent question for once in your life."

I punched Brandon's shoulder. "Leave him alone."

Brandon turned to me, tilting his head. "I'm flabbergasted to admit it, but Tyler has a point. I mean, I know Duke is a dick, but he's never been hateful to someone unless he thought they deserved it."

"Just tell them, Clay," Jackson said. "You don't have to protect him."

"No," I refused, crossing my arms.

"Then I'll tell them."

"Jackson, I swear to God, if you say another word I'll never speak to you again."

Jackson leaned back against the cushions behind him, twisting his mouth into a tight pucker.

"Is anyone else confused?" Tyler asked.

Mark raised his hand. "Me."

Brandon threw up his hands in frustration. "Somebody needs to tell me what the actual fuck is going on."

"Look," I said, slicing my hand through the air. "It doesn't matter why Duke is doing this. He just is. That's all you need to know."

"My head hurts." Tyler rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Brandon ignored him, crossing his arms. "So, what are you going to do about him?"

"Nothing," I said. I laid my hand over my heart. "I just wanted you to hear this from me, so that you understand why I'm doing what I'm about to do. I thought y'all deserved that much. Like I said, you're like my brothers." I locked eyes with each of them. I felt like I might cry. My voice wavered a bit when I said, "And I hope you always will be."

"Dude, of course. And same." Brandon laid a hand on my shoulder. He pulled me in for a tight hug. And not just a two-second, slap-on-the-back bro-hug. He actually embraced me. Which was really nice. He pulled back, returning his hand to my shoulder with a firm, but not unpleasant, grip. "But what the hell are you doing?"

Jackson leaned forward in his seat. "I'm also unclear on that part. You never explained your plan to me."

Emmett and I sat down on the couch beside Jackson, and I laid out my plan. It was nothing elaborate, but it would do the trick.

Chapter 68 - Accept Yourself

- *Clay* -

"I'm ready when you are." Emmett said, looking over at me. I sat on his bed, twiddling my thumbs, my knee bouncing rapidly. "It's not too late to back out."

I nodded, taking a swig from my water bottle to remedy my dry mouth. "It is. But even if it wasn't. I want to do this. I *need* to do this."

Emmett came over to sit beside me. He kissed my cheek. "I love you."

"Thank you for doing this with me." I gave him a peck on the lips.

"Anything for you, love."

I took a deep breath and gave Emmett the nod to start the recoding.

My entire body trembled. My hands were visibly shaking. I wasn't sure if it was from fear or excitement. Maybe both.

"Hi," I said, waving lamely at the phone. "My name is Clay. But if you're watching this you follow me, or go to school with me, so you probably already knew that."

I shook my head, rubbing my sweaty palms on my jeans. "Sorry. I'm really nervous. I don't really like being the center of attention. Or talking about myself." I glanced at Emmett, who smiled. I turned back to the camera. "But I have to now. Because someone I know-someone I thought was my friend-is basically forcing me into this."

I felt like I was speaking way too slowly, though I knew this was my natural pace. Everything just seemed to be moving at a glacial pace right now. As if the world had shifted on its axis and fallen into some freaky time slip.

"I won't let him dictate my life, or take this moment away from me. This should come from me. It should be my voice that says the words. So, here goes." I cleared my throat. "I'm gay."

I laughed and shrugged. "I'm gay!"

I couldn't believe I was saying the words out loud with such abandonment and joy. I thought this would be horrible. But it was oddly freeing.

"If you actually know me, this may come as a surprise, since I've exclusively dated girls. To them, I apologize if I ever caused you pain because I was unsure of myself. Robin, you were the best first girlfriend a gay boy could ask for. Dinah, I miss you dearly. You will always have a special place in my heart." I laid a hand on my chest. I knew she followed me, but I didn't know if she would watch this. "Summer, I love you, and I'm so sorry I was such a shitty boyfriend. I'm glad you found a better guy. You're amazing, and you deserve nothing less than complete devotion. Thank you for being the first person to accept me for who I am. For letting me cry on your shoulder when I thought I would never be able to find love."

I looked over at Emmett and took his hand, lacing our fingers together. "Speaking of which, you may be wondering about this guy sitting beside me. His name is Emmett. And he's my amazing, nerdy boyfriend, whom I love and adore with every fiber of my being."

Emmett kissed the side of my head. "I love you, too." he whispered in my ear.

"He's the reason I'm doing this." I said. "Not only because he gave me the courage to be myself, to love the parts of me I thought were unlovable, which he did, but also because I refuse to let anyone use our relationship as a weapon against me. My love for him is more real and pure than anything I've ever felt in my whole life. I won't have it held over my head like it's something to be ashamed of. So, I'm taking control of my life and telling everyone. Metaphorically shouting it from the rooftops, as it were. I'm gay. And if you've got a problem with it, then frankly fuck you."

I let out a nervous laugh. "Um, okay. That's it. Have a great day."

I turned to Emmett. "Do you think that was okay?"

"I think it was amazing."

I grinned and leaned in to kiss him. I pressed my forehead against his. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"I'm so proud of you."

I glanced off to the side, suddenly remembering that we hadn't stopped the recording. I grabbed the phone off the stack of books in Emmett's desk chair-his idea of a makeshift tripod-and pressed stop.

"I should probably edit that last bit out before I post it." I said.

"Or you could just post it as is. It's supposed to be real and raw, right?" Emmett shrugged. "But it's your coming out video. You should do it however you think is right."

I blew out a breath. "My coming out video? I hadn't really thought of it like that. Which is so dumb, because that's totally what it is."

"Are you scared?"

"Terrified." I said as I readied the post, typing a brief comment to intrigue my followers into watching it. I also tagged three of the most notorious gossips at Huntington High to get the word out quicker. "And kind of exhilarated."

Emmett wrapped his arms around me, laying his head against mine.

I stared at the button that would send the post out to the world, the muscles in my chest tightening, making it harder to breathe. "I don't think I can press it." I turned to Emmet. "Will you do it for me?"

"I will if you really want me to, but I think it should be you." he said, gently stroking my cheek.

I nodded. Taking a deep, shaky breath, I raised my thumb to the button. Before I could second-guess myself, I tapped it.

It was out there. I was out. The world could now see me for who I really was. Or, at least, the ones on Instagram. My friends said they would share the video. Jackson, Mark and Tyler were sweet for offering, but they had a collective following of ninety-six. It was Brandon, with his daily thirst-trap shirtless selfies, and his eight thousand followers, who could really make a difference.

Chapter 69 - The Story of Us

- Emmett -

I held Clay in my arms, stroking his hair as we laid in my bed watching light-hearted comedies and Disney movies to take his mind off the video. He put his phone on Do Not Disturb to silence the notifications every time someone left a comment. By the time we got to "I'll Make A Man Out of You" in *Mulan*, Clay had finally relaxed. He even belted the song with gusto, adorably off-key. We didn't make it much further into the movie because I started tickling him, teasing him about his singing. That soon turned into kissing, which turned into more.

"I can't believe how lucky I am." Clay said as we were getting dressed again. It was almost time for the football game.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, even if everyone at school hates me and starts calling me names, or bullying me, I know I have a lot of people in my life who love me for who I am." Clay turned around to face me, taking hold of my good hand. "Ever since I started having feelings for you, I got scared I'd lose everyone. That they wouldn't understand why I am the way I am. Or they might hate me for it. But they didn't. My family, my friends, they all know, and it's okay."

I fought back the urge to cry. Clay didn't need me sobbing. I leaned forward to offer him a chaste kiss on the lips. "I felt that way too before I came out. Even though I knew Carrie would get it. And my mom has always been a very progressive person. I still worried about being accepted."

"Does it ever go away? That feeling that you have to hide who you are?"

"I don't want to lie to you and say I never feel like that, because I still do. It's probably worse where we live, in the goddamn Heart of Dixie." I groaned and let out a long sigh. "Where people fly confederate flags as a symbol of pride. As if that stupid flag wasn't a mockery to everything our

country is supposed to be about. I mean, it's literally the flag of traitors to America. Like, how fucking dumb do you have to be to not understand that?"

I shook my head, shaking off my annoyance, and said, "I'm sorry for raging at you."

He smiled at me. "Never apologize for being passionate about what you believe in. It's very sexy."

"Thanks."

"We should probably get going." Clay stood up. "I'm just gonna use the bathroom real quick. Maybe splash some water on my face. My heart is beating like a million miles a minute."

I picked up my phone as Clay headed out the door. I knew he didn't want to see his post, but I was dying to see the reaction. It had been almost four hours since Clay posted it. There had to be a few people who said nice things. I thought that would give him more courage to face them at the game.

Several notifications cluttered my lockscreen, just from sharing the post. I didn't bother checking those. They would all be from people I knew, none of whom would be at the game tonight. Even Carrie was going to be at our school's game, now that she was a cheerleader. I scrolled through my feed past pictures of celebrities, interior design shots, adorable animals, and lunch orders to find Clay's video.

I couldn't believe it when I saw it. "Oh my God!"

Clay rushed back into the room. "What is it?"

"Babe, your post has hundreds of comments. And it's up to over a thousand likes."

"What?" Clay looked confused. "I only have a hundred and fifty-seven followers. I don't even think there are a thousand people at my school."

"I'm not sure they're all from your school."

"Who else would care about this?"

I clicked on the comment section, scrolling through. I reported a nasty comment that didn't get flagged because the person used creative spelling in their insult. But most of them seemed overwhelmingly positive. "This guy says 'love from Brazil.'"

Clay sat down on the bed, leaning on me to look over my shoulder. "What else are they saying?"

"It's mostly just about how brave you are. Some people are saying you're inspiring. There's lots of hearts. This person thinks we're an adorable couple."

"Well, can you blame them?" Clay joked. He kissed my cheek and laughed.

As my eyes scanned the comments, Clay asked, "How did all these people even find it?"

"You have like twenty-seven hashtags on the post."

"I wanted it to get attention. So everybody at school would see it and I don't have to keep coming out again and again."

I looked up at him. "You know you've probably got tons of DMs, too."

Clay nodded. He was practically glowing.

Curious about something, I clicked on Clay's profile. "You have over four hundred followers."

"No fucking way." Clay grabbed my hand, pulling it closer so he could look at the phone. His eyes went wide.

I set my phone aside and took his face in my hands, staring into those dreamy big brown eyes. "There are hateful people in this world, but there are also wonderful, kind, inspiring people, too. And you're one of them."

Clay's eyes suddenly teared up. "I don't even know how to feel about this."

"I think you should feel good about it. The people are speaking, saying you deserve happiness and love. Listen to them. Believe it."

Clay kissed me before wrapping me in his arms. "I never could've done it without you."

I squeezed Clay tighter. "I'm just happy to be part of your life."

Chapter 70 - Everybody Knows

- *Clay* -

I let Emmett drive us to the game in my car. With his blessing, I spent the ride over posting all the pictures I had saved of us. Three months' worth. I'd been too afraid to put them up before. Even the ones from before we started dating. I worried someone would see through me and know the truth. It was quite obvious in the way I looked at him how much I loved him. I started with the photos from our date that Mrs. Noble took. I added the photo I took of us downtown in front of the mural. The one of us after our first hike. The one from Sunday at the botanical garden I took after that bitchy woman looked at us like we shouldn't be there.

I felt a rush every time I shared a moment from our relationship that I thought would have to remain hidden. I didn't stop until I ran out of photos. I even changed my lockscreen from a generic geometric pattern to a photo I took of Emmett asleep in my lap at the park.

Another notification popped up, alerting me that I had fifteen new followers and forty-three new likes. "Ever since that one guy shared my video in his story, I got like double the followers."

"Yeah, they've been following me, too. It's crazy."

"I still have no idea what he's famous for, or why he's verified. Other than having like nine hundred thousand followers. I mean he's really hot, so I guess maybe he's a model or an influencer."

"Did you see his boyfriend?"

"Um, yeah." I smiled at Emmett. I liked that we could discuss things like this without jealousy or snide remarks. "I wish I had his abs."

"Please, boy. Don't even. You're gorgeous."

"Am I?" I leaned across the center console.

"So very." Emmett met me halfway, brushing his fingers through my hair. He gave me a tender kiss.

"You're totally *very* yourself, baby."

Emmett gave an embarrassed laugh, turning his eyes away from mine. Sometimes I didn't think he believed me when I said things like that. It seemed unfathomable to me he could believe himself to be anything less than spectacular.

"We should go in." I said, pulling back to my side of the car.

"I'm ready when you are."

We met up at the front of the car. I looked out across the sea of cars to the football field. A glow surrounded the stadium from all the huge overhead lights, making it a beacon in the dark, moonless night. Almost the entire school came to these things, not to mention their parents and siblings. Even former students who no longer had a connection to the school showed up on game night. My nerves were working, prickling the hair on the back of my neck, making my palms sweaty despite the chill in the air.

I looked at Emmett, watching me. "Are you okay with me holding your hand?"

Emmett slipped his hand into mine, interlocking our fingers. "I'm okay with anything you feel comfortable with."

"I just want to be like everyone else and not have to think about what I'm comfortable with. I mean, when I was with Summer, I never gave a second thought to holding her hand or putting my arm around her. Sometimes I'd even kiss her cheek. But I guess that was more of a show, for everyone else's benefit. I did it because that's what my friends did with their girlfriends. It was an act of mimicry, not genuine desire to do it."

"So no making out then?"

"Honestly, I always feel weird when I see couples kissing. People do it in the halls at school all the time. I've never been a fan of it. Not in public. It's way too intimate. Like a peck is fine. But do you really need to shove your tongue down someone's throat in front of so many people?"

"I get it." Emmett rubbed my chest. "Seeing straight people kiss makes me kind of nauseous too."

I glared at him. "That's not what I meant."

Emmett flashed a mischievous grin. "Well, are you okay if I put my head on your shoulder later? I'm probably going to fall asleep like ten minutes into this thing."

I chuckled, stepping up to lean against him. "Yeah, baby. I'm okay with that." I said, giving Emmett's cheek a small peck.

As we approached the gate, where a line formed to buy tickets, I squeezed Emmett's hand tighter. It was one thing to be brave and show my true self when I was alone in a room with no one but Emmett who loved and supported me unconditionally. It was quite another to have that same confidence surrounded by strangers from the other team's school, not to mention parents who probably hadn't seen my declaration. I also wasn't sure how many of my classmates actually watched the video. I recognized a few names in the comments, but I stopped reading them a while ago, after I saw one guy call us disgusting. Despite the hundreds of positive comments, that one negative asshole nearly sent me into a panic. It hurt worse because he actually went to my school. I recognized his name. He was on the football team. He was in my math class. This was someone who saw me every day, not some anonymous troll.

But I didn't want to dwell on the bad. Not when the good was so good. I knew the bad would come, regardless. That was just how the world worked. The positivity was a surprise, so I tried to make myself focus on that.

I looked at Emmett. "I'm scared."

"I'm right here."

"Clay," a girl called out.

I turned to see who said my name. I noticed the cheerleading uniform first, then my eyes lifted to the cute, round face, framed by two wavy, dark tendrils. "Robin?"

She smiled, jogging up to me. "I saw your video." Her eyes jumped to Emmett, then to our hands clasped between us.

"Robin, this is Emmett."

"I know," she said, bobbing her head. She was extremely bubbly, even for a cheerleader. "He's your boyfriend."

I turned to Emmett. "Robin was my girlfriend in middle school. My first girlfriend ever, actually."

"Cool." Emmett said. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too."

"Um, so what did you think of the video?" I asked, shifting my weight to my other foot, trying to play it cool.

"It was so sweet. Thank you for what you said." Robin clutched her hands together over her heart. "I really want to hug you, but I feel like that might be weird since we haven't talked since like eighth grade."

"I could actually use a hug." I took a step forward to hug her with one arm, still clinging to Emmett's hand—the tether that kept me grounded and safe.

After releasing me, Robin said, "I'm glad you're happy, Clay. I always thought you seemed really unhappy." She shook her head. "That's not really the right word. Maybe more like discontented."

"Did I?"

"Mm-hmm." Robin nodded. "But in that video, and even now—" she waved a hand at me "—you don't have that gloominess in your eyes. You seem

relaxed."

"Well, that's hilarious—" I let out a humorless laugh "—because I'm totally freaking out about going in there." I ticced my head toward the stadium.

"Why? Everybody knows."

"Do they?"

Robin barked a laugh. "Sweetie, this is the biggest news to hit Huntington since they arrested Mr. Hanover for selling weed and Adderall out of his trunk last year. I've been getting calls and texts for hours asking if I knew, and if I was your beard. I'd bet money that Summer and your other exes are also dealing with this."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think about how this would affect any of y'all."

Robin rubbed my shoulder. "It's fine, Clay. You have the tougher part in this."

Robin started backing away. "Listen, I have to grab something from my car and get back to the field before the game starts, but it was great talking to you. Don't be a stranger. Okay? I followed you, so DM sometime. We'll hang out."

I nodded. "I'd like that."

Turning back toward the line, Emmett nudged me with his elbow. "See. It's not going to be so bad."

"Robin has always been a sweet person, so her reaction is probably not going to be the norm."

Emmett leaned against my side, bringing his face in close. "You're being so pessimistic. I thought that was my job."

I cracked a smile.

"That's more like it."

Robin was just the start of my congratulatory tour. It took ten minutes to walk the fifty-foot distance from the gate to the stands. The warm welcome shocked me. I expected at least a bit of backlash. Apart from a few sidelong glances at us—possibly because we were two boys holding hands—no one made a fuss. It probably helped that Brandon, Jackson, and Tyler joined us, surrounding us, acting as our own personal secret service as soon as we got through the gate.

Chapter 71 - Tolerate It

- *Emmett* -

Clay and I sat with his friends on the top rows of the stadium. They were all so animated, heavily invested in the game. It devastated them every time the other team got the advantage, and they became equally excited every time their team succeeded. They jumped around and screamed instructions and curses at the players, as if the team could actually hear them. Their behavior utterly baffled me.

But I supposed they would look at me funny if they saw me at a concert. When Carrie and I saw Taylor Swift two years ago, I screamed myself hoarse. I lost my voice for two days.

I leaned in to speak into Clay's ear to be heard over the crowd's cheering. "I'm going to get something to eat."

Clay turned his head toward me, keeping his eyes fixed on the field. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"That's okay." I patted his thigh. "Do you want anything?"

"Just make your drink a large, please. I'll share it." Clay said, still distracted. He winced as a player got tackled.

"As if you even had to ask."

Clay finally tore his eyes away from the game to look at me. He smiled, his lips parting to show his teeth.

I stood up, letting my hand slowly slip from his until it was out of reach.

Halfway down the steps, someone clapped a hand on my shoulder. I got excited, thinking Clay had come after me. But it was only Brandon. He smiled at me.

When we reached the bottom, Brandon walked side-by-side with me in silence. I finally asked, "Are you getting food, too?"

"Fuck no!" Brandon looked horrified at the idea. "I don't eat trash like that. I work too goddamn hard for these." He lifted his shirt and flexed his stomach to show off his sculpted abs.

"Impressive."

Brandon winked and flashed a cocky grin. "I know." He tilted his head, scrutinizing me. "You know, I could help you tone up. You've got a decent base to work with. With some intensive training, you could get some excellent definition."

"I think I'm good."

"Okay. But all the girls love the abs. I bet Clay would like 'em, too."

I tried not to be offended. I suspected he was trying to be nice. "He hasn't complained yet, so I'll pass."

"Let me know if you change your mind." Brandon said. He broke away from me, turning to go into the men's bathroom.

In the concession stand line, I studied the menu. My eye caught on the nachos. Clay once said he loved the nachos at sporting events—the bastardized version with the round chips and the yellow cheese sauce that probably had no actual cheese in it. He and his father used to share them every time they went to games at the local college, before he got sick. They weren't something I would choose, but I got them anyway, because I knew he'd appreciate it.

"Hey," Brandon said, walking up to stand beside me at the pickup window. "It occurred to me that what I said might have offended you. I'm not trying to say that you have to work out or anything. I mean, Clay likes you the way you are. Obviously. He fell for you. I've been told I can be too blunt."

"It's fine." I said. "Really."

A woman appeared at the pickup window with the nachos and a large drink. I thanked her and took it, tucking the drink between my chest and my cast. I'd be so glad when I could get rid of that damn thing.

As we headed back to the stairs, I overheard a guy off to the side say, "Isn't that the guy from Clay's video?"

Another guy chimed in: "That thing made me sick. Did you see the way they were kissing?" He made a remark about Clay being crazy for leaving Summer for someone like me, though his choice of words were much more colorful.

My whole body tensed as shards of ice shot through my veins. I was glad Clay didn't come with me.

"What the fuck did you just say?"

The exclamation had me frozen in mid-stride. My head whipped around to see Brandon advancing on the guy. I called Brandon's name, but he ignored me.

"I don't know—" The guy didn't even get out a full sentence before Brandon seized him by the collar and slammed him against a wall.

"Say something else about my friend, asshole." Brandon screamed in the boy's face.

I looked around at the crowd that gathered to gawk at the spectacle.

The guy stuttered, unable to find his words. His frantic eyes searched for help, but his friend had abandoned him.

"Buh-buh-buh." Brandon mimicked the boy's petrified face and quivering voice. "That's what I thought, little bitch."

"Brandon!" I barked, taking a step toward him. "Stop."

Brandon pulled the guy forward and slammed his back against the cement wall again. "If you ever say anything about Clay or his boyfriend again,

you'll be shitting your own teeth. Got it?"

The guy nodded, his face contorted with fear.

When Brandon jabbed a finger at the guy's face, he flinched. Brandon chuckled menacingly. "Now that we understand each other, I want you to spread the word to all the douchebags dumb enough to be friends with you. Anyone who talks about my friends has to answer to me."

Once Brandon released the guy's shirt, he raced away, pushing through the crowd.

Brandon was smiling when he turned to me. "That took care of them."

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head. "No, it didn't! Violence won't make them hate us any less. If anything, being humiliated like that will make him dig his heels in even harder."

"I was only trying to help." Brandon raised his hand out toward the frightened bully fleeing the scene. "What if Clay heard that shit?"

"You know what? Clay is going to hear that. And worse than that, probably. It sucks, and I wish I could protect him from it too, but it's going to happen. Someone, somewhere, is going to call him a sissy, or a homo, or a fag. Maybe even to his face. That's just the reality of his life now."

Brandon's face fell. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine." I murmured as I turned and walked toward the stairs for our section, my stride swift and determined. I wanted to get out of there. Out of the spotlight.

Brandon raced to catch up with me. "Look, I don't like hearing people talk about my friends. And it's not just Clay. Like Tyler. He's the dumbest person I've ever met, and I remind him of it all the time. But if anyone else ever made fun of him, I'd kick their ass."

"I understand."

Brandon grabbed me by the elbow to stop me before I could get around the corner. "I know I'm not Clay's best friend. But he is *my* best friend. He's the person I go to when I really need to talk about real shit. He knows all my secrets. I feel bad that he thought he had to hide this from me until he didn't have another choice."

"I'm sure he would have told you, eventually." I said. "Coming out is hard. There's a voice in your head that tells you that no one will love you if they know who you are. That's like a billion times worse in a place where your neighbors and your relatives fight tooth and nail to make sure people like you don't have basic human rights."

Brandon pulled a strained face and shook his head. "See, I didn't think about any of that."

I started walking again. I sighed and looked over at Brandon with kinder eyes. He meant well. "Because you're a straight, white man. Not to mention the fact that you're attractive and rich. The world was basically designed for you to thrive."

"Can you please not tell Clay about this? I don't want him to be mad at me." Brandon looked like a wounded little boy, all sad, droopy eyes and pouted lips.

I didn't answer. I just turned and kept walking. I could feel Brandon on my heels, but neither of us spoke again.

At the base of the stairs, I looked up to our seats. Clay's head swiveled, surveying the crowd. He did a double take when his eyes passed over me. He sat up straighter, his lips stretching into a smile.

"What took you so long?" Clay asked as I sat beside him. He took the drink from me, sipping from the straw.

I glanced behind me at Brandon briefly. His brow creased with a pleading distress. I rolled my eyes and groaned. "The line was so long. And there were some jerks making trouble."

Clay tensed up and gripped my knee. "You're okay, though, right? They didn't mess with you?"

"They didn't say anything to me."

It wasn't a lie. They may have mentioned me, but they never spoke directly to me.

I held the nachos toward Clay. "Want one?"

Clay's wariness melted away. His easy smile returned. "I love these. Me and my dad used to eat them at like every game we went to." He ate one and moaned. "I'm so glad you got extra jalapenos. It's just not the same without them."

I leaned over to kiss his cheek and cozied up to his side, resting my head on his shoulder. I wouldn't let some bigots force me to hide my affection. Besides, I felt safe surrounded by Clay's friends. I suspected Brandon wasn't the only one who would jump on someone for messing with Clay.

Chapter 72 - I Think He Knows

- *Emmett* -

Someone sat beside me and patted my leg, startling me. I looked up from my phone to find Rachel beaming at me. I took out my earbuds and returned them to their case-I was bad about dropping them when I held them in my hand.

"Hi," she said.

"Hey." I said.

"I feel like you haven't been over in forever."

I didn't mention that I was at their house three nights ago. I snuck into Clay's bedroom again after the rest of the family went to bed. That one was a little trickier, because my mother was home. I had to get out and back in without waking her.

My eyes dipped down to her band uniform. "Nice outfit."

Rachel's lips curled back from her teeth, smacking on a giant wad of purple gum. "It's even worse with the hat."

I chuckled. "I didn't picture you as a marching band girl. What do you play?"

"Clarinet. And I much prefer concert band. I only joined marching band because it fulfills my P.E. requirement so I don't have to take gym."

"Ugh!" I shook my head. "I get it. I hate gym. I wish my school had a workaround like that."

Rachel angled herself to look around me at Clay. "You hear that, freakazoid? I told you, you're the only person who enjoys gym class."

Clay just laughed and turned back to watch the play unfolding on the field.

Brandon leaned forward and put a hand on Rachel's shoulder. "The hair is hot, Rach."

"Thanks." The word came out almost like a chuckle as Rachel tucked her hair behind her ear, her cheeks going rosy.

Clay spun in his seat to face Brandon, his eyes narrowed to slits. "Don't call my sister hot."

Brandon sat back, raising his hands. "I didn't mean it like that."

Rachel huffed, sending out a puff of fog. "I have to get back to the band." She smiled at me and stood up, then turned an icy glare to Clay, flipping him off. "Mom and Dad want to talk to you, by the way."

"Why?" Clay asked.

"Something about charity... or something. I wasn't really paying attention."

"That's helpful."

"I'm not your fucking messenger girl." She spun around and walked to the end of the aisle. She paused and looked back at him. "If you want me to show you where they are, you better move your ass."

When she started down the stairs, Clay jumped up. He paused to kiss my cheek. "I'll be right back, baby."

"Do you want me to come?" I asked.

"Nah. I think I know what this is about. It shouldn't take long." He hurried to follow Rachel, who hadn't waited for him. In fact, it seemed like she was rushing to try and lose him in the crowd. Clay chased after Rachel across the bottom row of the stadium.

Brandon moved to take Clay's former spot. "Can I ask you a question?"

I studied his face, curious what this could be about. "Sure."

"Did Duke want to hurt Clay because he was mad that Clay was dating you?"

I reared back, like he'd just swung on me. I threw a quick glance around the crowd. They were too concerned with the game to care about this conversation. Jackson and Tyler had gone to get food right before Rachel arrived, so there was no one to eavesdrop on us.

I took a long drag from my drink. My mouth was too dry. "What do you mean?"

Brandon stared me in the eyes, his brows slightly furrowed. "Did you date him before Clay? Is that what this whole fucking mess is about?"

I shook my head. I wasn't saying no; I just couldn't believe he figured it out. "Why would you think that?"

"Like I told Clay, Duke can be a real asshole, but he always has his reasons. Even if they don't justify his actions. Which to be clear, I don't think they do." Brandon looked me over. I suspected he didn't believe I was worth the trouble Duke put Clay through.

I certainly didn't think I was worth it.

Brandon didn't seem to notice my internal freak out. He just kept talking at me. "I started putting the pieces together after you and Clay left my house. I was so confused about why Clay was so adamant about not telling us why Duke was doing this. Then I remembered that day you hung out with us at the track. The fact that you and Duke knew each other. And when you called him Alfie, he didn't even flinch. Nobody calls him that. Not even his girlfriends call him that."

"What do you want me to say, Brandon?"

"Tell me I'm right." He arched his brows smugly. "I know I am."

"Why does it matter?" I asked.

"Because I need to know that one of my closest friends isn't a horrible person. That he had a good-or good in his mind, at least-reason for doing this. Clay is one of the kindest people I've ever known, and I don't want to believe Duke would hurt Clay like this just because he's gay."

The cup trembled in my hand. I felt on the verge of tears. My throat tightened. My voice was hoarse. "But if what you say is true, wouldn't that make what Alfie did so much worse? Because *if* it's true-and I'm not saying that it is-then that means Alfie knows what that struggle is like for Clay, and he still did it, anyway."

Brandon's eyes grew wider. "I didn't think about it like that."

"Lucky you. Because that's all I can think about." I wiped away a tear that had fallen. I hated crying in front of people. This was even worse because I wasn't sad. I was angry and frustrated. "Do you get how selfish a person has to be to intimately know the struggle someone is going through and use their pain against them to get something he wants?"

Brandon opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off. "Pretty fucking selfish is the answer."

When I saw Clay returning, I turned to Brandon. "Just so we're clear, I did not confirm a thing you said. I was speaking purely hypothetically."

"Sure you were." Brandon clapped me on the shoulder as he moved back to his former seat, allowing Clay to sit beside me again.

I smiled tightly, trying to conceal my inner turmoil. "What did your parents want?"

Clay shook his head, blowing out an annoyed sigh. "My mom wanted to introduce me to one of her friends."

"Was it about your video?"

"No." He took the drink from my hand and drank some. "Remember when I said I promised to volunteer somewhere as, like, penance for messing up, so

I could get my car back?"

"Yeah."

"Apparently, my mom knows a lady who works at the hospital, and I guess they need volunteers."

"Like a candy striper?" I asked, trying not to laugh as the image of Clay dressed in the red-and-white-striped pinafore popped into my mind.

Brandon didn't bother hiding his amusement. His laughter made us both turn around to face him. "I thought only chicks did that."

"I guess not." Clay murmured, facing forward.

I rubbed his shoulder. "You did tell me you want to be a doctor someday. I know it's not even remotely the same thing, but it might give you a feel for what it's like to work in a hospital."

"I said I *used to* want to be a doctor. Like when I was a kid. That's just way too much school, in my opinion. I admire anyone who does it, but I don't want that anymore."

I picked up Clay's hand and slipped my fingers through his. "What do you want?"

"I don't got a damn clue, baby." Clay leaned over to bring his face close to mine. "Whatever I do, as long as you're there, I'll be happy."

"Same."

He caught me by surprise with a kiss on the lips. It was just a peck that lasted only a second, but it was enough for me.

Chapter 73 - Call It What You Want

- *Emmett* -

The overpowering bass buzzed in my eardrums as I made my way to the bathroom. After the game, Jackson invited us back to his house for a party. Quite a regular occurrence for him. According to Carrie, Jackson's mother spent nearly every weekend going on trips to the beaches in Gulf Shores and the casinos in Biloxi with her boyfriend, so Jackson had a party almost every week. He didn't have a palatial home like Brandon. It was just a normal house—smaller than mine—on a huge plot of land. His nearest neighbor lived a mile down the road, making it ideal for a raucous evening of teenage debauchery.

The front lawn looked like a parking lot by the time Clay and I arrived, cars parked bumper to bumper without concern of blocking anyone in. We'd stopped off for dinner after the game, partially to celebrate how well our first public appearance as a couple went—around people we actually knew.

"Hey!" Carrie yelled over the music. She'd changed out of her cheer uniform into a sexy emerald green mini-dress that accentuated her curves with cutouts on the hips. It was slightly over-the-top for a kegger. Definitely inappropriate with the chill outside. Her curls hung free, bouncing with every step as she trailed along beside me.

"Hey."

When someone exited the bathroom, I raced in before anyone else could. Carrie grabbed the door before I could close it and slipped in behind me.

I grimaced at her. "I gotta pee."

"Who's stopping you?" She gestured to the toilet, turning to the mirror to check her makeup.

I rolled my eyes, angling my body so I was partially facing away. It was a good thing I didn't have a shy bladder.

"I don't know why you're being so prudish. It's not like I haven't seen your dick before. I highly doubt it's changed any in the last three years."

I laughed, thinking back to that day in ninth grade when Carrie convinced me and several of our friends to go skinny dipping.

"Do you remember Dan's?" I asked, zipping up my pants.

"How could I forget? I didn't know a guy that skinny could have one that big." She raised her lipstick and twisted it all the way out, giggling. She twisted it back to a reasonable size to apply a fresh coat. "The proportions just make no sense."

I nudged her to the side so I could wash my hands. "I don't know how Makenzie walks straight after taking that thing."

Carrie barked out a surprised laugh. "Tell me about it. I couldn't handle that."

"I second that, sister." I glanced down at her makeup bag. I picked up her eyeliner. "Can I use this?"

"Really?" She looked surprised. "You don't usually wear makeup around the straights."

I shrugged. "They all know anyway. Why not be myself while I have the chance?"

Carrie held the tube out to me. "Go for it."

"Clay's never seen me like this." I expertly drew thin lines around my eyelids without once poking myself in the eye. "I don't know if he'll like it."

"That boy is so smitten with you, he'd probably like you in full clown makeup."

"No!" I shook my head vehemently. "He actually hates clowns. He's terrified of them."

"That's hilarious." Carrie mumbled, holding her mouth wide open as she put on mascara.

"It's really not. He has an actual phobia. I was watching *The Greatest Show on Earth* one day when he came over."

"You mean *The Greatest Showman*?"

"No. It's a completely different movie. From the 50s. It won Best Picture at the Oscars, and people say it's one of the worst choices the Oscars ever made. It somehow got nominated and *Singin' In The Rain* didn't. I wanted to see if it was really that bad." I waved my hand in the air to tell her to ignore that. All of that was inconsequential. "Anyway, I paused the movie when he came into my room. The second he saw the clown on the screen, he literally backed out into the hall, shaking his head. He told me to turn the movie off or he'd leave."

Someone pounded on the bathroom door. "Would you hurry up in there?"

I handed her the eyeliner. "Ready?"

Carrie traced a finger around the outline of her lips, her eyes looking over her appearance. "I think I should wait a few minutes to teach that guy out there some patience."

"You are not." I took her hand and pulled her to the door.

We pushed past the guy standing outside, bouncing on the balls of his feet. He raced inside and slammed the door behind him.

"So, how goes the rebellion against Whitley?" I asked.

"I think I've got enough people on my side to call for a vote of no confidence."

"Do they have votes of no confidence in high school cheerleading?"

Carrie patted me on the back. "Don't you worry your pretty little head about it. Just know, by this time next week, Whitley will be busted down to the bottom of the pyramid. Metaphorically speaking. Because she's way too tiny to be an actual base. Her bird bones would get crushed. Not that I wouldn't kinda secretly love to see that."

"You scare me sometimes."

Carrie beamed at me. "Thank you."

We found Clay and Jackson sitting around the kitchen table, along with Brandon and Tyler. Jackson was facing off against Brandon in a game of Quarters.

"Fuck!" Brandon said as his quarter missed the shot glass in the center of the table. It flipped almost all the way across the table to Jackson. Brandon downed the shot glass in front of him. Of the five glasses in front of him, three were already empty. Brandon hissed and slammed the fourth glass on the table upside down.

"Baby!" Clay held his arms out toward me. When I went to him, Clay slipped his arms around my waist and pulled me down to sit on his lap. A crease formed between his brows as he stared at me, puzzled. "What's different?"

I loved that he noticed, even in the dim lighting. "I put on eyeliner. Do you hate it?"

Clay shook his head, tightening his arms around my waist. "I think it's sexy. It really makes your eyes stand out."

"That's kinda the point."

"Why haven't you ever worn it before?"

I glanced around the room before looking back at Clay. "I try not to call attention to myself most of the time. But sometimes I just have to be me."

"Is there other stuff that you don't do that you'd like to?"

"A lot."

"Like what?"

I brushed my fingers through Clay's silver hair—his own way of standing out and being himself. "I'd be a lot more outgoing with my clothes in public. I'd probably paint my nails. Oh, and I'd love to get some piercings."

Clay raised his brows, intrigued. "What do you want to have pierced?"

I fought a grin. "Nothing dirty, if that's what you're thinking. Just like around my ears and maybe my naval. And definitely my nose."

"So, no Prince Albert for you, huh?" Clay asked with a laugh.

"God, no!" I shook my head. I was surprised he even knew what that was. "No one's going anywhere near my dick with a needle."

"What the fuck are y'all talking about over there?" Brandon sounded horrified. It showed in his face, too.

Clay burst out laughing, making me shake on his lap.

I quickly explained, so they didn't think needles were some kind of kink I was into.

All the guys looked extremely uncomfortable. Carrie, meanwhile, cackled. She hooked her arms around Jackson.

Brandon shook his head. "Who the fuck would want that?"

I shrugged. "That's what I was saying."

"Who would even think of that?" Jackson asked.

I actually had an answer for that. "I don't know if it's true, but I read that it was started by Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert—hence the name. Apparently, the dude was so hung that it got in his way and it was uncomfortable when he rode his horse. So the piercing attached to like a hook in his pants to hold it in place and keep it out of his way."

"Dude must've been packing a twenty incher for it to be so unmanageable that he'd install a hook in it." Tyler said.

"Even then I couldn't do it." Emmett said.

"Agreed." Brandon said.

"Hey, Jackson," shouted a guy from the next room. "Someone's barfing in the fireplace,"

"Son of a bitch!" Jackson jumped up, slapping his handful of quarters on the table, and ran from the room.

"That's gross." I said.

Clay laughed. "Jackson's parties are always like this. Someone throws up somewhere they aren't supposed to at least twice a month."

"I know." I said, arching a brow. "I've been to Jackson's parties before."

"When?"

"I used to bring him." Carrie said, taking Jackson's vacated seat. "When me and Jackson started dating, I brought Emmett every weekend for like two months."

Carrie challenged Brandon to a match. He took her up on the offer, ordering Tyler to refill the empty shot glasses from a bottle of cheap tequila. She tossed a quarter down. It bounced off the table, directly into the shot glass. "Who do you think taught Jackson how to play this?"

"Fuck me." Brandon groaned, wiping a hand over his face. "I'm gonna be so shit-faced."

Clay couldn't seem to shake the fact that I had been to so many of Jackson's parties. He brought it up again as he was driving me home later that night. "Seriously, I can't believe you were at Jackson's before."

I nodded. "How do you think I met Alfie?"

"I guess I never thought about it."

When we stopped at a red light, Clay stared at me with a pensive expression.

I brushed my fingertips across Clay's cheek. "What is it?"

"It just occurred to me that I was probably there, too."

I shrugged. "Probably." I didn't recall ever seeing Clay before that night at the bowling alley. He was definitely a guy I would have noticed. Then again, I spent most of those nights huddled in a corner, staring at my phone, praying no one would talk to me.

"I wonder how close we came to meeting." Clay said, his voice wistful. "What if it was me you met that night instead of Duke? Do you think we still would have ended up together?"

"I don't know." It was a nice thought. Clay and I together for all that time. All those months feeling the joy he'd brought to me since we met. Even more since we got together. But it was no use dwelling on the past. So I posited an alternative: "Maybe we had to meet exactly the way we did to fall for each other."

When the light changed, Clay turned into our neighborhood. "Why do you say that?"

"You might not have been ready yet. That was over a year ago."

Clay chuckled, reaching over to take my hand. "I think I've been ready for you my whole life, Em."

"Yeah, but I mean ready to admit that. To understand your feelings. To accept them and to let yourself fall for me. All of that is a big deal."

Clay stopped the car in front of my house. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it was meant to happen the way it did. Either way, fate or coincidence, call it what you want. I'm just glad it happened."

"Me, too." I leaned over the console as Clay did the same. We met in the middle in a kiss.

When we broke apart, Clay said, "Then again, I've had feelings for you since the day we met. If you hadn't kept telling me you didn't like me, I probably would've done something about it sooner."

"Are you ever going to let that go?"

"Hmm." Clay puckered his lips, narrowing his eyes contemplatively. Then he shook his head. "I don't think so."

"I hate you."

Clay grinned. "You have a funny way of showing it."

"Shut up."

After I kissed him goodnight, he started laughing. "I love you, Em."

"Yeah, yeah."

Clay caught my elbow as I turned to get out. "Really?" he asked in disbelief. "That's how you're leaving me."

I turned in the seat to face him, reaching my hand up to press it to his cheek. I moved in for a quick, soft kiss. And again for another that was not so chaste. I pulled back to look into his beautiful brown eyes, glittering with the overhead light. "I love you, too."

"That more like it." Clay said. "'Night, baby."

"Goodnight, love." I said, getting out. I closed the door behind me and waved as I walked backwards toward the front door. As always, he waited until I was safely inside to leave.

Chapter 74 - Out in the Cold

- *Clay* -

A knock at the door startled me. Mostly because it wasn't at my bedroom door, it was the back door that led outside. I picked up my phone to check the time. It was nearly two in the morning. I'd only just gotten home from dropping Emmett off fifteen minutes ago and switched out my jeans for sweatpants.

I grabbed a shirt as I went to the door, tugging it over my head. I pushed the curtain aside to see who was outside. At first, I thought it might be Emmett. But he always texted when he got to the door, so he didn't risk anyone hearing the knock.

The motion detector lights on the back porch shined on Duke, washing out his dark skin. He was looking around, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his letterman jacket. He looked nervous.

I scowled, opening the door. "What do you want? Are you mad I outed myself and ruined your master plan? Well, *muah-ha-ha*, motherfucker. I out-schemed you."

Duke sighed, his eyes still darting around. "I was never going to actually out you, Clay."

I scoffed, crossing my arms over my chest. "That was not my takeaway from our last conversation."

"I just wanted Emmett back. I never thought you'd call my bluff. I thought you were a coward." He took a deep, shuddering breath and finally met my gaze. "Like me."

"Am I supposed to feel sorry for you? Because I don't."

Duke didn't answer. Instead, he changed the subject. "I went to Jackson's party after the game. None of the guys would talk to me. Brandon even said that I'm lucky they hadn't kicked my ass for what I did. Apparently that's thanks to you. You told them not to."

"Yeah. I did."

He shrugged, furrowing his brows. "Why?"

"What would it have solved? I figured you'd just release the pictures out of spite."

"If our roles were reversed, I would've let them beat the shit out of you." Duke shook his head. He seemed to rethink that. "That's not true. Because I never would have told them. I would've done whatever you asked."

"I only came out the way I did because you were threatening me. I didn't want the whole school to know. I wasn't even ready to tell the guys yet. You took away my choice."

"I know. And I know how wrong it was. Like I said, I was never actually going to tell anyone. Even if you hadn't done what you did and you still kept seeing Emmett. It was a hollow threat."

"That doesn't matter!" I snapped. I instantly cringed at my volume, recalling the time. I looked at my bedroom door for a second, as if my parents might burst through at any moment to find the source of the ruckus. I turned back to Duke. I lowered my voice to say, "I thought it was real."

"But you still chose Emmett over protecting yourself. I need to know why."

"Because I love him." I thought that was obvious. "I wasn't gonna let you take that away."

"I love him, too. But I could never do what you did. I'd die if anyone knew about me."

Despite my anger, I felt a deep sadness for him. I understood that feeling. I felt it myself not that long ago.

I didn't know how to react when tears started trickling from Duke's eyes.

Fuck.

I groaned, pushing through my anger. I stepped forward and laid a hand on his shoulder. Duke threw his arms around me, breaking down into heavy sobs that shook his whole body. He squeezed me tight, leaning on me like he could no longer hold himself up on his own.

He was too heavy for me to keep propping him up, so I dragged him over to sit on the edge of the bed. He cried on my shoulder, soaking my shirt, for nearly ten minutes.

Once the tears finally subsided a bit, I asked, "If you love Emmett so much, why did you break up with him last year?"

Duke looked at me like that was a crazy question. "It was because I loved him so much." He pulled his sleeve down over his hand to wipe his cheeks. "I can't be with a guy. Not seriously. I started imagining a life with him. Beyond hooking up and high school."

"That's what happens when you fall in love with someone."

"He was supposed to be a way to get this out of my system," Duke said. "So I could move on from these feeling and be with a girl, like I'm supposed to, without thinking about what it would be like to be with a guy all the time."

"I think what you're supposed to do is be true to yourself."

"You can't be that naïve, Clay. You know my family. My grandpa is a preacher. He's convinced being anything other than straight is a perversion. An affront to God. He talks about gays in the same breath as rapists and pedophiles. He says they all go to the same place in Hell. How do you think he would feel if I brought Emmett to Sunday service and introduced him as my boyfriend? Or even just dinner at my house?"

"Your grandpa sounds like an asshole. And just because he's a preacher doesn't mean he has the final say in what is and isn't an affront to God.

Unless he has some power I'm unaware of."

Duke shook his head. I didn't know if he was answering or just thinking about it.

"That's what I hate about organized religion." I continued. "It's a bunch of people trying to interpret a two thousand year old book that's been translated through a dozen languages, and trying to force everyone else to mold to their beliefs."

"You don't believe in God?"

I shrugged. "I'm not saying there is no God. I really don't know. And I don't know what I even believe in, but if God exists, why would He make us this way—gay, bi, or whatever—only to punish us for it? Isn't that a flaw in His supposed grand design?"

"My grandpa says it's a test of our willpower."

"If he really thinks it's such a sin, and that it's something we are meant to overcome to be godly or whatever the fuck it is he thinks we're supposed to be here for, how does he explain all the gay animals? Because unless *The Chronicles of Narnia* are real, there ain't no lion Jesus to wash away their sins."

Duke furrowed his brow. "You've given this a lot of thought, haven't you?"

"Maybe once or twice."

Duke laughed.

I also gave a small laugh. Mostly because that was a big fat lie. I'd spent so many nights after meeting Emmett, wondering about my feelings for him. What they meant to me. What they meant to the wider world. How I might be perceived for even entertaining those feelings. Then, I'd inevitably start thinking about Emmett: his shiny black hair, his olive skin, his hypnotizing green eyes, and those perfect lips of his. That always made me hard, so I

jerked off and went to sleep with thoughts of Emmett fresh in my brain, leading to beautiful fantasies. Most of which I'd now lived out for real.

A moment later, the weight of everything between us settled in again. Duke gulped, making his Adam's apple jump. "Do you think you can ever forgive me?"

"Maybe. With a lot of time." I said. "But I don't know that I could be your friend again after what you did. I don't think I'd ever be able to trust you the same way I used to."

Duke nodded. "That's fair."

"I'll tell the guys that I don't mind if they still want to hang out with you, though."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know." I said. "But I also know how lonely and isolating you can feel when you're struggling with identity and not living up to expectations. I cried myself to sleep so many times those first couple months after I first started having these feelings. Plus, I know you and Mark have always been super close. You guys were friends before either of you met any of us. You shouldn't lose your best friend because you made a mistake."

"You're too nice, Clay. I don't deserve it."

"You really don't." I smiled, thinking back to something Emmett said the night we met. "But I'm not a grudge holder." I didn't want to hold on to hate. It was a useless emotion that only brought misery and pain to everyone involved. I didn't have to forgive Duke or even be his friend again, but I could choose to let go of my anger.

After all, I had Emmett and Duke didn't. That, along with Duke's own self-loathing, was enough punishment.

As I walked Duke over to the door, I said, "I didn't tell the guys about you. Or about why you blackmailed me."

"Why?"

"It's not my secret to tell. People deserve the right to decide who gets to know, and how, and when. Even you. And if you never want to tell them, that should also be your choice."

"I'm sorry I took that from you." Duke said as he shuffled out the door, tugging on his sleeves. The motion light illuminated the back porch.

"I'm choosing to look on the bright side. At least I don't have to hide who I am anymore."

"Aren't you worried about people hating you? I mean, my grandpa isn't the only person around here who thinks like that."

I leaned my head on the half-opened door and shrugged. "I'd rather have people hate me for who I am and be happy, than have everyone love me for who I pretend to be and be miserable."

Duke nodded. "I wish I felt like that."

"Maybe you will someday."

"I hope so, but I doubt it."

That made me very sad for him. His gaunt face and red-rimmed eyes weren't helping matters, either. But he wasn't my problem to fix.

"Bye, Duke." I said.

Duke furrowed his brow and took a shuddering breath. "Bye, Clay."

I shut the door, flipping the lock. I suspected he understood this wasn't just a regular farewell. It wasn't "Goodbye for now until we see each other again." It was just goodbye. We would definitely see each other again, but this was the official end of our years-long friendship. It was sad, but a necessity nonetheless.

A minute later, the motion light went off, and Duke was officially out of my life.

Chapter 75 - Shake It Off

- *Emmett* -

Clay showed up at my house the morning after the game, his skin slick and shiny with sweat, his shirt damp down the front and under the arms. Despite the chill in the air last night, today had turned hot again.

"Can we talk?" Clay wiped his hand across his sweaty upper lip as he stepped inside, slightly panting.

I closed the door and raised a questioning brow. "Did you run here?"

"Kinda. I was actually on my way back home." Clay placed his hands on his hips. "I run two miles almost every day."

"Agh! Why?" I didn't mean to sound so disgusted.

"It helps with my anxiety disorder."

A jolt shot through my chest and my jaw dropped. I quickly regained my composure to ask, "Since when do you have an anxiety disorder?"

"I've had issues ever since I was a kid. I've been on pills and gone to therapy. It's why I'm seeing Dr. Singh." He spoke so casually. It was kind of frustrating me. "But exercise seems to help me the most."

I just couldn't let this go without a discussion. "You said you were in therapy because you came out. Why did you lie?"

Clay took a deep breath, blowing it out between his lips. "I didn't exactly lie. I just didn't tell you the whole truth. That is why my mom made me go back."

"We promised we wouldn't lie to each other again. Especially not about big stuff."

"I'm sorry. I don't like to burden people with my problems."

"I'm not people, Clay. I'm your boyfriend."

Clay's lips stretched into a huge grin. "I love hearing you say that."

I placed my hands on my hips, mimicking his posture as I shook my head. "Don't try to be cute. I'm mad at you."

Clay's smile melted away, his face turning serious. "My dad's death really messed me up. I've had panic attacks and really bad anxiety ever since. My mom worried the stress of coming out would make it worse. That's the whole truth."

I jabbed a finger at his chest. "No more lies!"

"No more lies." Clay repeated. "As far as I'm aware, you know everything there is to know about me now."

I nodded. "We're supposed to share the hard stuff so we don't have to carry it by ourselves."

"I really love you, y'know."

My frustration faded, and I couldn't help but smile. "I love you, too."

Clay took a step closer, then paused. "I'd kiss you right now if I wasn't all sweaty."

I raised my arms to hook them around Clay's neck. "Maybe we should do something to get me sweaty and it won't matter."

Clay looked around the empty living room. "Is your mom home?"

I shook my head. "Nope. She's at work till six."

"Then, I think that can be arranged." Clay's arms encircled my waist, pulling me tight against his body as our lips met.

I tugged at Clay's shirt until he got the hint. He broke away and reached over his shoulder, grabbing the back to pull it over his head, leaving his hair a mess, sticking up all over the place. He tossed the shirt aside as I used my fingers as a comb to lay his hair flat.

As Clay returned to kiss me, I ran my hands over his torso, over his muscular chest and shoulders, digging my fingers into his back, feeling the muscles stretch and contract as his hands searched my body.

We stumbled our way over to the stairs. I nearly tripped over the bottom step, but Clay kept me steady. I laughed at the fumble. "I've already got one cast. I'd rather not have another. How about we pause until we get to my room?"

"Deal." Clay gave me a quick peck before releasing me.

I grabbed his hand and raced up the stairs.

As usual—except that once, the morning after our first time—Clay handed me the condom after a rousing round of foreplay. I was very glad my mother wasn't home for this one, because Clay had suddenly become quite vocal. He yelled out God's name as often as he said mine, and he seemed really fond of saying, "Fuck," a lot.

"So what did you want to talk about?" I asked afterwards, drawing meaningless lines across Clay's smooth skin.

Clay filled me in on his visit from Alfie last night. I shook my head, baffled by the story. "I can't believe you fell for that. It's all an act."

"You didn't see him." Clay stared at me, his face solemn. "He was really upset. Crying even. I've never seen Duke cry before."

I'd seen Alfie cry plenty, but they were always crocodile tears. I rubbed Clay's arm and kissed his cheek. It was scratchy where he hadn't shaved for a few days. "I love you for having such a big heart, but he doesn't deserve your sympathy."

"I disagree." Clay said.

Before I could interject, Clay raised a hand to stop me. "Look, I won't be his friend or anything, but I won't dwell on this either. I just want to put it behind me. It all worked out for the best in the end."

"If you say so." I mumbled.

"I do, in fact, say so." Clay turned onto his side to face me, propping up on his arm. "You have every right to stay mad at him for everything he's done. I just can't live like that. I have too much of my own baggage to carry that around with me too."

"Well, you're much nicer than me." I said. If Clay wanted to move on, I would support that. It was probably a healthier option than letting the resentment fester.

Clay brushed his fingers through my hair, an impish smirk twisting the corner of his mouth. "No offense, baby, but I don't think anyone is debating that."

"Hmph. And I thought I was bitchy."

"Oh, you definitely are." Clay said, snickering. His fingers traced a line down my arm that sent chills racing across my skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps and raised hairs along the way. "And I love every bitchy bit of you."

I kissed his shoulder. "You know, we're wasting a lot of valuable time talking that we could spend on much funner activities?"

"I'm pretty sure ' *funner* ' isn't a word, smarty-pants. But I agree."

Clay kissed me, leaning forward until I laid back on the bed. As he rolled on top of me, I slipped my arms around him. He broke away to look me in the eye. "Ready to go again?"

"When am I not ready for you?"

Chapter 76 - Just the Two of Us

- Clay -

Over the next two weeks, everything seemed perfect. I had Emmett, and we were deliriously happy. More than I ever thought, or even hoped to be. We went out on dates in public where we might run into anyone. We even went back to Vibrant a few times. Last week, Emmett finally got his cast taken off, which made sex and spooning a lot easier.

Sitting on the lawn in Crestview Park, with Emmett's head resting in my lap, I stroked his hair, as enthralled by watching him as he was by the world in his novel. We sat beneath the same tree we lounged under on the day we confessed our love. We'd been back to this spot many times since that day. Sometimes after school, we would grab a late lunch from the food trucks. Then always back to this spot just to enjoy being together without the worries of school, friends, or parents. Here, it was just the two of us. That's the way I preferred it. I suspected Emmett would say the same.

On occasion, he would read to me from whatever novel he'd given me recently. I could listen to his voice for hours. He got so animated while reading, giving the characters distinct voices, acting out their feelings as if this were Shakespeare in the Park. So far he'd given me *Wuthering Heights* and *Great Expectations*. I much preferred the latter. He was right about the characters in *Wuthering Heights*. They were all intolerable selfish people. After he finished his glorious act, he'd spout these long lectures of what the characters and their motivations represented for the time. Inevitably, this would lead him to talking about the authors. I didn't follow half of what he said, but I loved to see him get that passionate. Oh my God, did I love it.

But he was reading something new currently, and thoroughly engrossed. His lips mouthing incoherent shapes as his green eyes scanned the page at a much faster pace than I could ever hope to match.

I hated to interrupt, but I had something I wanted to talk about. "So, baby, you know, next week is my school's homecoming week."

Emmett glanced up at me quickly before returning his attention to his reading. "Is it?"

"It is. And I was thinking, I already have this amazing, cool ass suit that would be perfect for the dance."

He puckered his lips and nodded, his eyes still trained on the book. "It would be."

"There's really only one thing I actually need."

"What's that, love?" Emmett mumbled, sounding barely interested.

I huffed. "A date. I need a date, Emmett."

"*Oh, yeah .*" He said it like he hadn't thought of that. "People usually take dates to those things."

Annoyed by his nonchalant attitude, I pushed the book down against his chest so that he would look at me. I could tell he was being oblivious on purpose, teasing me.

I glared at him with a single brow raised. "Got any ideas about who I could take?"

"I guess you'll just have to ask someone and see what they say." The corner of Emmett's mouth quirked up.

"Okay." I picked up Emmett's book and slipped the bookmark in to keep his place. As I set it aside on top of his messenger bag, he sat up and faced me.

I took hold of his hands, staring into his lovely green eyes, the sunshine making the golden bit around his pupil shine more vividly. "Emmett, will you be my date to the homecoming dance?"

"Why, yes, Clay. I would love to." he said with a lighthearted laugh. "Now, was that so hard?"

I launched myself at him. "You're such an asshole!"

We tussled for a bit, rolling around in the grass, giggling like children. When I started tickling him, Emmett called for a truce. I ceased the attack and leaned back, raising my hands in a detente. Emmett's face was beet red. We both panted to catch our breath.

"You know I hate being tickled." Emmett said.

"That's why I did it."

"You realize I know what you hate, too. What if I dressed up as a clown the next time you came over? How would you like that?"

I nodded. "Point taken. I'm sorry."

"Thank you." He leaned over and kissed my cheek. "And I'm sorry I was giving you a hard time. I really would love to go to your dance with you."

"Good." I smiled at him and leaned in for a proper kiss. When I broke away, I brushed my fingers across Emmett's stubbly jaw. His stubble always looked much thicker than mine, even after only one day of not shaving. Probably because his hair was so dark. "We should really go."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I want to do things with you that are extremely inappropriate for public viewing. Illegal even."

Emmett grinned. "In that case, let's definitely get out of here."

Emmett hurriedly packed his bag and slung it over his shoulder. He took hold of my hand as we raced back to the car to find a more suitable place to enact my ideas.

Chapter 77 - ...Ready for It?

- *Emmett* -

"Do you think highlighter would be too much?" I asked, turning away from Carrie's vanity mirror to look at her in her peacock blue dress. Since she was also going to Huntington High's homecoming dance with Jackson, we decided to get dressed together.

Carrie looked up from her work, untangling the necklace she wanted from the clump of a dozen other chains. "I don't think so. But I'd go sparingly. You have a tendency to overdo it."

"Says the girl who puts it on her cleavage." I looked down at her low-cut neckline.

She waved a hand across her boobs. "It's to accentuate my natural curves."

I raised an incredulous brow. "It's to make people stare at your boobs, and you know it."

Carrie shrugged and went back to her work on the necklaces.

I grimaced at my face in the mirror. More specifically, the shiny red gargantuan blemishes. "Why does this always happen right before something huge?" I asked, rubbing in the foundation. Three pimples had appeared on my face overnight—on my chin, my cheek, and the center of my goddamn forehead. I moved on to the highlighter, taking her advice to go easy. This was a high school dance with a bunch of straight people, after all.

Carrie giggled. "You remember in seventh grade when you tried to use Makenzie's foundation, and you had that one spot on your face that was paler than the rest."

"And I kept putting more on the rest of my face to even it out, and my face ended up being about three shades lighter than my neck." I laughed, thinking back to my naivete, when I assumed coverup would just blend in, eventually. "I looked like a fucking mime."

"It wasn't that bad." Carrie was still chuckling when she came over and knelt down beside me. She pointed to the ends of her necklace. "Fasten me."

I pushed aside the few curling tendrils that escaped her updo and did as she asked.

She turned to face me, the blue-green jewel nestled in the hollow of her throat. She tilted her head as she examined me. "You've gotten much better at makeup. If I didn't know, I'd never guess you had any on."

I picked up the eyeliner pen, leaning toward the lighted magnifying mirror for a better view. My mouth formed a wide O as I drew the line around each eye.

After applying a coat of shimmery gloss over her lipstick, Carrie held the tube toward me. "Want some?"

I shook my head and spritzed my face with some of Carrie's setting spray. "I'm good. I don't want to scare the straights too much."

Carrie smirked and tossed the gloss into her purse. "Some of them could use a little shaking up."

When my phone lit up, I picked it up to read the message from Clay just as the doorbell rang. "Our gentlemen callers have arrived."

I stood up and took my suit jacket off the back of the chair, slipping it on. I'd opted for a solid scarlet blazer this time, with a matching bowtie.

Carrie grabbed her bag and hooked her arm through mine as we headed out to the living room where Clay and Jackson were speaking to Dr. Herrera and my mother.

"You two look great," Mom said, clasping her hands together in front of her mouth. "Carrie, I love that dress."

Carrie twisted her hips to make the knee-length skirt swish, showing off the shimmer in the fabric.

Clay walked over and slipped an arm around me, a wide grin on his lips as he leaned in to offer a chaste kiss as a greeting. He turned his head to the side to whisper into my ear. "Damn, baby. You look so fucking hot."

"You, too." I looked Clay over. He was wearing his gray check suit. He'd switched out the white shirt for a black one and added a skinny black tie. It really made his silver hair stand out. His brown roots were showing, but I kind of loved it like this, which is what I told him when he asked if he should get it touched up.

I noticed Clay was also wearing a rose on his lapel that matched my jacket perfectly. When I pointed it out, Clay's lips twisted into a sly grin. "Your mom sent me a picture of your outfit. I didn't want this to clash." He produced another boutonnière that matched his own and pinned it to my lapel.

"You are adorable."

Clay gave me another quick kiss. "I really am."

After a round of photos, we headed outside. A gigantic black Escalade limo idled at the curb.

"You really went all out," I said.

"Brandon's treat," Clay said.

"Brandon got us a limo?"

"He's waiting inside. We had a little pregame at his place. He had a lot and didn't want any parents to smell the booze on him."

Clay opened the door and let me get in first. Brandon was at the far end, making out with a girl I didn't know, shamelessly groping her until Clay got in and said, "Could you cool it with all that hetero shit? I don't appreciate you subjecting my impressionable boyfriend to *that* lifestyle choice."

Brandon broke away and started laughing. He wiped his hand across his mouth. "I swear to fuck, dude, you get gayer by the day."

Clay beamed with pride. "Thank you."

Clay and I scooted around to the side bench to let Carrie and Jackson in. Clay slipped his hand into mine as Brandon pressed a button on the ceiling and said, "Yo, dude, let's get this party on the road."

Clay squinted his eyes, staring at our hands. He looked up at me. "When did you do that?" He gestured to my scarlet nails.

"Yesterday after school. Me and Carrie got mani-pedis for tonight."

"I like it. I'm glad you're doing more things that you wanted."

"It's a start. You make me want to be brave."

Clay leaned over to kiss my cheek. "I know the feeling."

Brandon let out wolf-whistle. "Jesus, Clay! That's some serious action you got goin' on. It's gettin' hot in here now." Brandon waved his hand at his face. "Anyone else super horny? Just me?"

Clay leaned his forehead against the side of my head, laughing into my ear. He turned to his friend and flipped him off, still grinning widely. "Fuck you, Bran."

"Sorry, dude. I don't swing that way." Brandon leaned forward to get closer to us. "Although, you gotta tell me, is it true what they say?"

"About what?" Clay seemed prematurely annoyed.

I understood why when Brandon said, "I heard dudes give head like ten times better."

Clay just scoffed and rolled his eyes. I wondered if he was recalling his less than stellar first attempt, which I had to assume was because of nerves because he hadn't disappointed since.

I don't know what possessed me to say the next words out of my mouth: "Are you angling for a volunteer?"

Clay burst out laughing, soon joined by Jackson and Carrie. Even Brandon laughed, spitting out the liquor he'd just guzzled from a flask. His date didn't seem amused to have what smelled like whiskey dousing her dress. She shoved him off and scooted to the edge of the seat, which made everyone laugh even harder.

Chapter 78 - Come Together

- *Clay* -

As usual, they held the dance in Huntington High's gym. Emmett commented that Heron Prep had a banquet hall for such occasions. "We only use our gym for P.E. and sports." he said.

"Well, ain't y'all fancy." Brandon quipped.

It was Carrie's turn to chime in: "Nobody wants to smell moldy old jock straps while they're trying to party."

Summer appeared from the crowd on the dance floor in a flouncy, strapless yellow dress that fell to her knee. She ran over to hug me. Shawn trudged behind her, giving a nod by way of greeting. He wore a very basic charcoal suit that strained against his broad shoulders. He'd even matched his tie to her dress.

Summer took my hands and lifted my arms, looking me over. "The suit looks even better in person than in those pictures you posted."

I grabbed my lapels, twisting my waist, and puckering my lips, doing my best to imitate a male model in a fashion show. I'm pretty sure I just looked like Zoolander giving his Blue Steel face. "A picture just can't capture all of my gloriousness."

Summer shoved my shoulder before offering a hug to Emmett, pulling back to survey him. "And you. Wow! I'm surprised Clay can keep his hands off you."

I wrapped an arm around Emmett's waist, hugging him close. "Believe me, I'm having a hard time. In more ways than one." I winked at her.

"Gross." Summer said.

Brandon gave me a playful punch to the shoulder. "Nice."

The girls huddled together to compliment each other's hair and dresses, each of them saying the others' were better, denying the praise heaped on themselves.

I slipped my hand into Emmett's and ticed my head to the side for him to come with me. We broke away from the group, off toward a table in the darkest corner of the room. Not because I wanted to hide him, I just wanted a place we could hold hands and kiss without being a spectacle. There had been very little backlash from my coming out, except for one incident where I opened my locker and a bunch of printouts of gay porn fell out, scattering across the floor. I suspected the culprits were the three guys at the end of the hall cackling like idiots. But I ignored them, picking it all up to throw it away, with the help of Summer, Jackson, and a few random underclassmen I'd never met.

Most people just didn't care enough to be offended, so long as it didn't directly affect their lives. The ones that did care were a minority I could easily ignore.

Although, I had suddenly found myself the center of attention in most rooms. People treated me like a celebrity, and not in the good, give-me-free-stuff way, more so in the "Oh my God, look! It's *that* guy," way. It was seriously anxious-making to have so many watchful eyes on me, scrutinizing my every move.

As we skirted the edge of the dance floor, we passed Robin with her date. A very cute boy from the swim team who could really fill out a speedo—front and back. Robin seemed to appreciate his assets as well, her hand gripping his butt firmly.

When she spotted me, she waved and called out, "Save me a dance?"

I pointed toward our intended destination. "Find me later."

She waved again, giving her attention back to the boy, who was also getting very handsy, verging on inappropriate. That was technically against the

rules of the dance, but the chaperones were all gathered at a table, chatting. I suspected their cups had more than soda. No doubt there was a confiscated flask passing between them under the table. They usually ended up more wasted than the students by the end of the evening.

I squeezed Emmett's hand, weaving through the tables. A few people greeted me like they knew me. Some I recognized, though I didn't know any of their names.

Someone squealed, and suddenly Emmett yanked my arm back, nearly pulling it out of the socket. I turned to see him hug Rachel in her voluminous black tulle dress that could've been a costume in *Black Swan*. Rachel got a limo with her own friends, who were all gathered at the table with their dates. Her friend Jenny was holding hands with another girl. They both smiled brightly at me.

"You look so good, Em." Rachel said. "Way too hot for my brother, frankly."

Emmett smiled while I rolled my eyes.

Rachel tugged on her boyfriend's arm to make him stand up. He'd gone for a basic look in a simple white button-down with a black tie. "This is my boyfriend Dylan."

"Hi." Emmett said.

Dylan gave a nod in acknowledgment and raised his hand to offer Emmett a horribly uncoordinated dap. He was cute, but he rarely spoke. He'd been to our house many times, but I couldn't remember him ever giving much more than a monosyllabic response. At first, I thought he was nervous about being around his girlfriend's family. But that seemed to just be his personality. I figured since Rachel hardly ever shut up, maybe they were perfect for each other.

"Okay," I said. "You've monopolized my boyfriend's time enough."

"Don't be rude." Emmett scolded.

I was slightly annoyed because we could see Rachel any time. But I wanted Emmett to have fun, so I heaved a resigned sigh. "Fine. While you're doing this, I'm going to get a drink. Want one?"

Emmett nodded.

I leaned in for a quick peck on the lips. "Be back in a sec."

Halfway across the gym, a meek voice called my name. I turned to find Jenny racing up to me. Her date trailed behind her, moving much slower, despite the fact that she was wearing Chucks while Jenny had on heels.

Jenny's dark hair was all pushed to one side, and it had fallen to cover half her face. She pushed it back in a gesture that I suspected she'd done more than once, given the amount of annoyance she showed. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure." I said with a half shrug. I wondered what she could want. I knew her well because she was my sister's best friend, but we didn't exactly converse one-on-one like this.

"I'm part of this club that I thought you might be interested in."

"What kind of club?"

"The Pride club," she said, speaking hesitantly. "It's like an LGBTQ+ thing."

"I didn't know Huntington had one of those."

"We do. But we don't exactly have a ton of members." Her hair fell over her eye again and she scoffed, tucking it back again.

Her date finally caught up. She was wearing an awesome purple velvet jacket that I would very much like to own. Though, I doubted I'd have the confidence to wear it. The other girl took Jenny's hand.

Jenny rubbed the girl's arm, leaving marks in the velvet. "This is my girlfriend, Ciara, by the way."

"Nice to meet you." I said.

Ciara gave me an acknowledging nod, turning to Jenny. "Did you ask him?"

Jenny looked at her and nodded.

"So, what does the club do, exactly?" I asked.

"It's kind of a support group, mostly." Jenny said. "We talk to each other about stuff that we maybe aren't comfortable talking about with friends and family. Either because they aren't supportive, or they just don't understand what it's like."

I nodded. My parents were great, but I doubted they could understand the turmoil I felt during those months of questioning everything I thought I knew about myself.

"Rachel said we should mention that we also do philanthropy." Ciara said. "Something about your parents taking your car."

My parents would never accept a school club's charity work as a substitute for our deal. Besides, I kind of enjoyed volunteering at the hospital. I didn't have to wear the pinafore that Emmett and Brandon joked about, just a blue polo shirt with the hospital's logo on the chest. It was actually pretty easy. When I wasn't working in the gift shop, I was basically a delivery guy, taking flowers and balloons and such to patients' rooms.

I looked at Jenny. "So, Rachel put you up to this?"

"She thought it might interest you." Jenny replied.

"How many members do you have?"

Jenny rubbed her hand up and down her arm. "Six, including us and Rachel. We also accept allies if any of your friends might want to join with you."

"Well, seven just happens to be my favorite number."

"Does that mean you're in?" Jenny asked, wincing at me apprehensively.

I patted her on the shoulder. "That means I'm in." I wouldn't mind knowing some other people in my new community besides Emmett.

Chapter 79 - Closure

- *Emmett* -

Slipping away from Rachel and her friends, I found a seat at the table Clay had wanted. He was right. It was dark and cozy in the corner. And no one seemed to pay it any attention.

"Can I talk to you?"

I looked up from my phone to see Alfie standing on the other side of the table. Anger immediately took root in my chest. "Why would I ever want to talk to you?"

He pushed his hands into his pockets. "I want to apologize."

"Save your breath. I won't believe a word you say, anyway."

"Clay accepted my apology. Why can't you?"

"Clay is a nice person who wants to see the best in everyone. He doesn't know you like I do."

Alfie circled around and sat in the chair beside me, despite the lack of an invitation. "Please, Emmett. I'm sorry. I was bluffing when I said I'd out Clay. He understands I did it because of how much I love you."

I snorted. "Those words may have gotten to me last year, or hell, even a few months ago. Now they're as useless as your moral compass."

Alfie tried to grab my hand. I snatched it away. I leaned in close to keep my voice low. "I'm not going to make a scene because this night is important to Clay, and I love him. But make no mistake, Alfie. You are dead to me. And if you ever come after Clay again, I will ruin your fucking life. And that's not a bluff."

Alfie rolled his eyes. "Okay, Emmett. What are you going to do, tell people we were together? They won't believe you."

I smiled. I picked up my phone and went into my DMs, clicking on the ones from Alfie. "See, when Clay first told me what you'd threatened to do, I was planning on doing a little blackmail of my own to stop you. But Clay asked me not to go to you, and I respected his wishes. He wanted this to be on his terms. To come out his way. And I supported him."

I flipped my phone around to show him the screen, scrolling up through all the messages and pictures he had sent me. I stopped when I got to the video he sent me last year. "I had forgotten about this one. You say my name twice in this. I don't think your denials would work so well if I released that."

"Would you really show that to people?" Alfie's voice cracked, his terror-stricken eyes filling with tears.

"Would I? Hmm. Let me think." I tapped my chin, glancing off to the side, pretending to consider it.

"Emmett!" he whisper-screamed. His hand grasped my arm, which was lying on the table. His grip was too tight. When I glared at it and met his eyes, he released me.

I clicked out of our messages and swiped my finger across the screen to delete the only evidence of our relationship, making sure he saw me doing it. "No. I would never do that. And not just because Clay would hate me if I did."

Alfie looked so confused. "Why did you delete that?"

I laid my phone on the table and crossed my arms over my chest. "Outing someone is disgusting and evil. I just wanted you to understand for a second how you made Clay feel. Give you some perspective on the hell you put him through."

Alfie took a deep, shaky breath. He swiped at his watery eyes and cleared his throat. "I get it."

"I hope you do." I said sincerely.

Alfie stood up and buttoned his suit jacket. "I really am sorry."

I shrugged. "And I really don't give a shit."

Alfie opened his mouth. It seemed like he wanted to say something else, but he thought better of it and turned around, walking over to a table where Whitley Montgomery sat in a floor-length purple gown, staring daggers at Carrie-I guess the coup worked. Alfie kissed Whitley's cheek, gaining her full attention. They deserved each other. He sat with her and started chatting and laughing. It made me wonder if he was so good of an actor that he could hide his pain, or if any of what he just expressed to me was even real. Either way, I was glad to be done with him.

Chapter 80 - Comfort Crowd

- *Clay* -

At the refreshment table, I scanned the options. I knew not to go near the punch. By now, it would taste like battery acid with all the different alcohols added. Every loser who had the idea to spike it assumed they were the only one. There were always at least three at every dance. It was really more about bragging rights than actually drinking the punch. If they actually wanted to get drunk, they could drink what they brought in the flasks, like Brandon.

I ordered two Cokes from the boy manning the table. He looked about twelve. Definitely a freshman. The upperclassmen on the dance committees always stuck the younger members with duties on the night of, so they could have fun.

A girl walked up to stand beside me and smiled at me. "Clay, is that you?"

I almost didn't recognize her with her new nose. It completely changed her whole face. "Ashley?"

Ashley was my first high school girlfriend. We lasted for almost two months. After the first month, she suddenly became very clingy and jealous. I couldn't even talk to another girl without her blowing it out of proportion, which was a problem for me. I enjoyed talking to girls. Their conversations were always much more interesting and invigorating than most I had with my guy friends. I couldn't even mention another girl without her accusing me of wanting to sleep with her. Which, frankly, was extremely laughable. Even before I knew I was gay.

Her smile widened. "It's been so long." She spoke with a much thicker drawl than most people in town. She was from the same swampy, backwoods area as Tyler, way out in the middle of nowhere, although her family was majorly wealthy. The diamonds around her wrist and dripping

from her earlobes proved that. I suspected her modest pale pink dress was designer.

"Um, yeah." I scratched the back of my head. This was the first time I'd spoken to her in three years. "It has."

Ashley walked forward and gripped her hands around my biceps. "I'm praying for you."

Everything about this exchange made me very uncomfortable: the touching, the statement, the pitying look in her eyes.

"Why?" I asked tentatively. Though with that sentence, the answer was pretty clear.

"Because I don't want you to go to Hell." She spoke without a trace of sarcasm. "My whole church is praying for you, actually. After I showed my pastor that... *video* you made." She made it sound like I'd done porn. Although, that might be preferable to them as long as it was with a girl.

I pushed my arms up to break her hold on me. "Save your prayers, Ashley. I don't want them."

She clutched her fingers around the sterling silver crucifix necklace she used to wear every day. I guess she still did. "You may not want them, but you *need* them."

I shook my head. "It's people like you that caused me to be so lonely and miserable my whole life. I repressed any genuine feelings I had and forced myself to be something I'm not as a defense mechanism."

That assessment was courtesy of Dr. Singh, who I kind of loved talking to. He was a huge basketball fan, and we spent twenty minutes of my last session talking about the Knicks lineup. We spent the rest of the session talking about how much I loved Emmett and our plans for next year.

Ashley shook her head. "That's just mind games trying to tempt you into this sinful life. The boy I dated had a heart of gold and a pure soul. He

wasn't gay." She reached out like she was going to touch my face, but I backed away.

"Yeah, Ashley, he was. You know how I know that?"

Ashley tilted her head to the side, her lips twisted into a sour pucker. She didn't look like she wanted the answer.

I decided to tell her, anyway. "I like men. I like the way they look. I like the way they smell. But most of all, the thing that really cinched it for me, I really, *really* enjoy taking my boyfriend's dick." I winked at her. "But you get where I'm coming from. I heard all about you and Thad at church camp this summer. *Tsk, tsk, tsk*. In the chapel, of all places, Ash."

Ashley's mouth fell open, releasing a horrified gasp. She fell back a half step; her face going pale.

I turned to the boy who'd poured my drinks. He was trying very hard not to laugh. I grabbed the two cups, which were starting to sweat. I gave a nod and a smirk. "Thanks, dude."

I turned back to Ashley. "If you'll excuse me, my boyfriend is waiting." Just to really fuck with her, I took a step toward her, and added, "And I'm just so horny, I may have to find an empty room somewhere to just let him rail me until my eyes roll back in my head."

"You're disgusting." Ashley grunted.

I chuckled. With the most cheery tone I could muster, I said, "Fuck you very much, Ashley. It's been a shit show talking to you. I hope I never hear your whiny-ass voice again." I made a kissing motion at her. " *Caio* , hun."

Leaving her behind, I set off to find Emmett, who had made his way to the table in the corner. I put the drinks down and grabbed Emmett's face to kiss him, with more tongue than was strictly necessary.

"What was that for?" Emmett asked.

"Just for being my boyfriend. I really love you."

"I know."

"You want to come grind on me on the dance floor to make all the homophobes really uncomfortable?"

"Hell yeah!"

I took Emmett's hand and led him to the middle of the floor, surrounded by our friends. I started laughing when Brandon and Jackson got on either side of me and Emmett to join in our dirty dancing crusade against self-righteous assholes.

When the music changed to a slow ballad, Brandon and Jackson wrapped me and Emmett in a tight embrace. The rest of our friends followed suit until we were just a mass of swaying bodies in the middle of the dance floor.

I had so much love for these people, especially the boy right in front of me.

I pressed my forehead to Emmett's, gazing into his eyes. There were some moments in life where you just knew you'd always remember it as something truly special. This was one of those for me. It seemed impossible to believe that just a few months ago, I had resigned myself to having a life of despondency and numbness. Accepting that was all I'd ever know. That I'd never have a true connection with anyone. It just proved that you could never know what will happen. And you should not be afraid to go after what makes you happy. Sometimes, for those brave enough, you get everything you never knew you always wanted.

I did.

Chapter 81 - Crazy

- *Clay* -

I stirred my straw around my iced latte, eyeing the sign in the shop window next to the weird ass gas-station-turned-coffee-house Emmett adored (I kind of did too), while he finished his second chocolate chip muffin. He looked adorable. It was kind of chilly today, so he was wearing a navy cardigan over a Taylor Swift Fearless tour t-shirt. He paid \$147 for it on eBay last week, outbidding someone called t_swizzle13 at the last second. After he won the bid, we had very enthusiastic sex. I figured I could deal with sharing his love with Taylor if it got me that kind of action. I couldn't wait until Christmas, so I could finally give him the red, heart-shaped sunglasses I bought, identical to the ones Taylor wore in the "22" music video. He was going to freak out.

I leaned forward in my seat, folding my arms on the table. "If I wanted to do something kinda crazy, would you do it with me?"

Emmett glanced up. "I told you I'm not going bungee jumping with you. Flinging yourself off a bridge with a rubber band attached to your feet is not my idea of fun. I mean, what if it breaks? What if you bounce back up too high or the wind is too strong and you hit the bottom of the bridge?"

"You worry too much, baby. And that's not even what I'm talking about."

"Then what?"

I pointed to the shop I'd been staring at for the last ten minutes.

Emmett turned to look. He spun back, gripping the arms of his chair, his face a mask of shock. "You want a tattoo?"

"No." I squinted, tilting my head. "Well, yes, actually. I kinda do. But that's not what I'm talking about. I was actually thinking something a bit less

permanent that won't give my parents a heart attack. Like maybe getting my ear pierced. You said you wanted one, right?"

"Yeah, but I didn't know you did, too."

"I didn't know I did either until you talked about it." I took a deep breath. "I've been sitting here staring at that sign, and I really want to do it."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. And I thought we could do it together. For moral support."

Emmett's wariness quickly turned to excitement. "Really?"

"Uh-huh." I said, chewing on my straw. "What do you think?"

"I think, hell fucking yeah!"

In the lobby of the tattoo parlor, we examined the wall of pictures of the artists' past work. Emmett moved over to the glass case of piercings on display. I joined him, pressing against his back, wrapping my arms around his waist. I peered over his shoulder at the selection. Particularly the ear studs.

Emmett pointed to something-his nails were still red from homecoming last week. "What about those?"

"For you?" I asked.

"For you."

My eyes bugged out as I shook my head. "I'm not getting my nipples pierced."

Emmett grinned and leaned back into me. "I'm just fucking with you, love." Emmett put a hand on my head and pulled me closer to kiss my cheek.

A beautiful blue-haired woman in a cleavage-bearing tank top walked out from behind a curtain on the other side of the case. She gripped the edge of

the countertop, leaning on it, her tattoo sleeves on full display, as well as the hawk inked across her chest. Her artwork was so detailed and intricate. I averted my gaze, worried she'd think I was staring at her boobs. If I were to get a tattoo, I'd want it done by whoever did hers, not that I would tell her that. I wasn't sure about the etiquette of tattoo artistry. She might take it as a slight against her skills.

"What can I do for you fellas?" She had an accent, but it was definitely not Southern. I suspected somewhere in New England. I wondered why anyone would choose to move here. Maybe she'd followed her love, as I was planning to follow mine to New York next year.

"We want piercings." Emmett said.

"What kind?" she asked.

Emmett pointed at me. "He wants his ear done." The woman nodded. "I want a nose ring."

"You got ID?" She raised a brow adorned with two rings. "You gotta be eighteen, or have a parent's permission."

Emmett and I both produced our fake IDs. She scrutinized the cards and looked up at us, pursing her lips. "Okay." She handed them back and pointed at me. "You first."

She sauntered over to a hall at the back of the lobby and turned to wait for me.

When I pulled away from Emmett, I suddenly felt nerves creeping in. My brain was asking me if this was a good idea. It could get infected. It was definitely going to hurt.

"Can he come with me?" I asked.

Her bored demeanor melted into a warm expression. "Sure."

I grabbed Emmett's hand for a dose of bravery, dragging him along. There were four curtained off areas in the hallway. A tattoo gun buzzed behind one

curtain, accompanied by an occasional muffled whimper.

I sat in the chair the woman gestured to. Emmett stood beside me, keeping a firm grip on my hand despite the clamminess of my palms.

"Gold or titanium?" She held up two studs.

I pointed at the titanium. I wasn't a big fan of gold.

The woman nodded. "Right or left?"

I looked at Emmett for his opinion. Emmett shrugged. "It's your head, love."

I looked back at the woman. "Can you do both?"

"Sure. But which one do you want to start with, just in case?"

I shrugged. "The right, I guess. I dunno." She was already on that side, so it made sense.

After wiping my earlobe with an alcohol swab, she marked the spot. As she raised the needle, I shut my eyes tight, squeezing Emmett's hand in anticipation for the pain. I felt a small prick, no worse than a bee sting.

I opened my eyes. "Is that it?" I'd built it up so much in my mind, sure it would be terrible.

The tattooed woman grinned at me. "That's it. Now, the other side." She glanced at Emmett. "Can you switch with me?"

Emmett moved around to hold my other hand while she repeated the process on my left ear.

"You look so hot." Emmett said.

"Your turn." she told Emmett. We switched places, me taking hold of his hand now.

"I can't believe I'm actually doing this." Emmett said. "I never thought I'd-" Emmett screeched when the woman pierced his nose. "Fuck me!"

I laughed and leaned down to press my lips to his temple. "You okay, baby?"

Emmett wiped away the single tear that rolled down his cheek. He blew out a breath. "I'm good."

We followed the woman back to the front room to pay. I was about to hand my credit card over when Emmett grabbed my wrist. He pulled out his wallet and handed her cash. "This one's my treat, Sam."

"What?" It took me a moment to remember that we used our fake IDs for this, so I couldn't use a credit card with my real name. "Thanks."

Samuel Highgarden was my alias. 22, from Georgia. The guy who sold it to me asked me where I wanted to be from. I suspected no one who heard my accent would believe I was from anywhere above the Mason-Dixon Line. Which turned out to be a smart idea. Tyler wanted to be from Hawaii, and his ID got confiscated two days after he bought it.

The woman gave us each a slip of paper on how to take care of our piercings until they healed. "Have a great one, guys." She leaned forward, locking eyes with me. "And we'll be here if you change your mind about those nipple rings."

My mouth fell open, my face growing hot. She'd obviously overheard our earlier conversation. Emmett burst out laughing and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "Come on, baby."

Emmett steered me to the door. Outside, he gripped my chin and turned my head one way, then the other. "You look really hot with earrings."

He said that already, but I appreciated it just as much the second time.

"I kinda love this." I pointed at Emmett's nose. "It's very cute."

"You could get one, too."

I shook my head. "I think I'm stopping with the ears. I already got one more than I planned to."

"So, what do you wanna do now?"

I took hold of his hand. "Let's just walk around for a little while. Enjoy the day."

Emmett nodded. "I'm good with that."

Epilogue I - Welcome to New York

- *Emmett* -

"I'm sure it's one of these." Clay said, flipping through all the keys on the loop of his keychain. He grimaced, discarding key after key.

I hefted the box in my arms a bit higher after it slipped an inch from my sweaty palms. I didn't know why we'd bought all this crap in one outing. We needed to remember that we lived in a six-floor walk-up. Not to mention that we had to park a block away from our building. "Hurry."

"I'm sorry, baby." Clay's eyes lit with recognition. "It's this one."

"Eighth times the charm," I mumbled.

Clay threw an incredulous glance in my direction, sliding the key into the lock. A satisfying click sounded, and Clay twisted the knob. It gave way, opening up on our new apartment. "Ha!" He stuck his tongue out at me.

I ignored his mocking and pushed past him. I set the box down with a heavy thud in the middle of the living room. Not that it was really a living room. Not in the sense that he and I had always known. Everything was literally in one room. It was listed as a studio when we rented it. They did not mention that our bathtub was five feet from our refrigerator. With no walls to separate them, or anything else.

Thankfully, the delivery people had arrived early this morning with our furniture, after two days of us sleeping on a pallet of blankets on the wood floor. Though none of it was where it should be. Clay and I would spend hours, if not days, rearranging everything to optimize what little space we had. We couldn't stay to tell them where to put everything, because we had scheduled campus tours-me at NYU, Clay at Pace University-to make sure we didn't get completely lost on the first day of classes. Plus, we wanted to see each other's school.

While I went to the kitchenette to splash water on my sweaty face, Clay took out his phone. He smiled and waved at the screen. "Hello gays and girls of the internet. And y'know anyone else who might be watching. We're all-inclusive around here."

I rolled my eyes. After his mini-boom of followers last fall, he'd taken to going live to fill them in on our lives every few weeks. He bumped that up to a few times a week after graduation. Last week, he documented our entire road trip from Alabama to New York, showing off all the sights along the way. He showed them our first ride on the subway, our trip to a genuine New York deli down the block, and our first visit to Central Park the day we arrived. I had no problem with him doing it, especially because he talked out a lot of his issues, venting like they were his support group, which I suppose they kind of were, in a weird way. I was mostly just cranky and tired. Also, this was the fifth time he'd done this today.

Clay spun the phone around to show off the apartment. "Isn't it fabulous? Our own little love nest."

When he turned the phone toward me, I raised my hands to cover my face. "I'm a mess." I hadn't expected New York to get as hot as it did back home. I thought I'd finally be rid of the blazing summer heat once I left the South behind. Wrong.

"You're gorgeous," he replied.

"Just show them the apartment, and please leave me out of it."

"Fine." Clay said, sounding disappointed. "But they all agree with me." Clay laughed at his phone screen. "Except for Carrie, who says 'get yourself together, you sloppy bitch.'"

I sighed and waved. "Love you, too, Care."

Clay turned the phone away, moving to the window. "Can you believe this view? We can see Manhattan from our window. Does that not just blow your mind?" I thought he was talking to them until he looked back at me with wonderment in his eyes.

I walked over and snuggled up behind him, wrapping my arms around his shoulders to look out. "It's amazing."

Clay turned his head to kiss my cheek while his phone was directed out the window. He reached up with his free hand to ruffle my hair. He mouthed, *I love you* .

I smiled and mouthed the words back.

As I retreated to get the shopping bag that Clay had left in the hallway, he continued the tour. "Can you believe the only thing separating the bathroom from the rest of the apartment is a curtain that we hung ourselves? So glamorous." He pretended to tuck his hair behind his ear, though it was too short. "Actually, that curtain was quite the to-do. Kerfuffle. It was a bitch. I've always been hopeless with handy things. And well y'all have seen Emmett."

"Fuck you."

Clay grinned at me. "I told you I'm not gonna do that while we're on camera. This is Instagram, not Only Fans." He looked at the camera. "I do not have one of those before any of y'all ask."

"That's not what I meant." I said.

"Sure, baby. We believe you."

"I'm going to take a shower. So no tours of the bathroom for them." I pointed to the phone. I removed my sweaty shirt and tossed it at him, hoping to entice him off his phone.

"Well, that's about all there is to see, folks. I'll post pictures of the place once we have everything the way we want it." He blew a kiss to the camera. "Love y'all. Talk later."

Clay ended his livestream and set the phone on the counter. "Now, what's this I hear about a shower?" He walked over to put his arms around my waist, drawing me in close.

I hung my arms across his shoulders and kissed him, tugging on his shirt. He broke away to take it off. His fingers hooked into my waistband, licking my neck as he pushed my shorts down. Apparently, he wanted to start now. That was okay by me.

Epilogue II - In the Future When All's Well

- *Clay* -

The months flew by once we got to New York. The first week went slowly as we settled in and got our apartment together. Everything shifted into warp speed as soon as classes started. We made it to October in the blink of an eye.

I quickly picked up our dirty clothes off the floor—most of them belonging to Emmett—and stuffed them in the hamper next to the rack of clothes that acted as our closet. I started shoving things in random drawers to make the place look tidy. I'd probably be pissed at myself later when I went looking for my class notes, but that was a problem for Future Clay. Our apartment was a shoebox. We didn't have enough room for anything.

"You stress out about these things way too much," Emmett said. "You don't even know these people. Besides, they already like you. Otherwise, they wouldn't keep following you."

He was partially right. I didn't know most of them. But there were a few I talked to on a regular basis. I had come to appreciate my little community. I talked to them about everything: my life, my relationship, losing my father, my coming out drama, even my anxiety disorder. So many of them claimed it helped to see me pursuing the life I wanted despite the obstacles that many of them related to. These live chats were especially helpful as me and Emmett were going through the process of applying for college, waiting for acceptance, then finally moving to New York. A lot of them gave me advice on where to live, where to eat, and the awesome local places to go if I wanted to avoid the tourist traps.

I stopped to lean over the edge of our bed to give Emmett an upside down kiss. "Wish me luck, baby."

"You don't need it." Emmett gripped my face and pulled me back down for another brief kiss. "But good luck."

I sat in the desk chair, turning so the windows showed off our view of Manhattan across the river. I blew out a breath and pressed the button to start the live stream. Within thirty seconds, I had forty-six viewers. Then two hundred. The number kept rising.

"Hello, all you lovely people out there." I gave a wave. "I see a lot of familiar names popping up. What's up, Brandon? You better be going home for Thanksgiving, dude. I miss the hell out of you. Everybody, say, 'Hi, Brandon.'"

A flood of greetings for Brandon came in.

"Hi, Brandon," Emmett said from the other side of the room.

The comments filled with hearts. Some commenters wondered who was with me. They had to be new.

"That's my beautiful boyfriend speaking, for those of you asking." I flipped to the back camera to show Emmett stretched out on our bed, focused on his own phone. "Say hi, baby."

Emmett rolled his head to the side and waved. "Hi, people."

I switched the camera back to myself. "He's so adorable. Even when he's cranky."

"I'm not cranky." Emmett jumped up and came over to stand behind me, wrapping his arms around my neck. "I'm hungry."

I turned my head to kiss Emmett's cheek. "I'll only be a minute. I promise."

"Okay." Emmett leaned around and puckered his lips. "Kiss?"

I gave him a peck on the lips before he went back to plop down on the bed. Dozens of heart-eyed emojis floated across the screen. Comments about our cuteness filled the chat. I laughed, reading a comment. "GracieGirl19 called

us, 'Couple goals.' What do you have to say to that, babe?" I pointed the camera at him.

"Thank you, Gracie. Mmmwah." Emmett blew an exaggerated kiss. "Love ya, girl."

I scanned the comments as they rolled by. 1,419 viewers, and it seemed they all had something to say. It sometimes blew my mind that I had almost as many followers now as Brandon. I didn't even have to get half-naked to do it. And as his friend, it was my duty to constantly rib Brandon about that fact.

I gasped. "Rachel is here." I smiled and waved at the camera. "Hey, Bean. Love you. I miss you so much. Say hi to Mom and Dad for me."

"Love you, Rach!" Emmett called out.

"Anyway, guys, I just came on to say, it's been exactly one year since I posted my coming out video. I'm so grateful to all of you guys who have followed me and stuck around to listen to me ramble about my boring life. And for those of you who sent me such amazing messages about how I inspired you to come out or to accept your identity, I'm truly touched by that. I literally cry at every one of them."

"He really does," Emmett shouted.

I scowled at him, but he wasn't paying attention, so I returned my focus to the camera. "I've been so overwhelmed by all the love and support I've gotten. It's been one of the most amazing things to ever happen to me. And I know some of you ask if I'll post more, and I will try, but school is a bitch and a half. Besides, I didn't set out to get followers or be quasi-famous and put my life out there. I just wanted to own who I am."

"Baby," Emmet said, getting up to put his shoes on. "Carrie and Summer are downstairs."

"Okay." I looked back at the camera and smiled. "Well, that's my cue. I'm going to celebrate this day with my friends and my amazing boyfriend."

Have a great one, guys. I love you all. Bye." I blew a kiss and waved before ending the stream.

I got up and embraced Emmett, giving him a proper kiss now that we were alone.

"I can't believe we've been together for over a year," Emmett said.

"I know." I hooked my arms around Emmett's neck. "I can't believe we actually made it to New York together. It's been everything I didn't know I always wanted." I cupped Emmett's cheek in my palm. "It's more than what I pictured for my life."

"Because you didn't think you'd go to college?"

"Because I thought I'd be a shell of a person forever, never really connecting to anyone that I was with. You gave me love, Emmett Noble."

"I mean, how could I not love you? You're delightful." Emmett softly chuckled.

"No. That's not what I'm talking about. I don't mean you gave me *your* love, as in you love me. Which is amazing, and I'm so grateful to have you. But I mean, meeting you, being with you, brought that out of me. It gave me the feeling of love. Feeling it, understanding it. And, as corny as it sounds, falling in love with you made everything make sense."

Emmett pressed his lips together as his cheeks reddened.

"Before you, Em, I had a picture of my life and my future, and I understood the picture. I could recognize it, but it didn't look right. It was grainy and dark. Then you showed up and yelled at me for being an asshole, and it changed everything. What I saw became this new image that was so much more clear and honest. And it was always there. I just needed help to focus and see it the right way." I shook my head, sighing. "I'm sorry. That was such a terrible metaphor."

"Don't worry. I know exactly what you mean."

"Good, 'cause I felt like I was being a bit too rambly to make any actual sense."

"After a year with you, I know how your mind works." Emmett gave me a peck on the lips. "It's a twisty place, that mind of yours, but it makes sense to me."

"Well, that makes one of us."

Emmett laughed and squeezed me tighter, kissing my cheek. "Come on, weirdo. Let's go before Carrie and Summer yell at us for wasting their time after they both traveled for over an hour to get here, which you know they'll mention."

"I thought one of the perks of being gay was you get to show up to things up whenever you want and claim to be fashionably late."

"I have literally never been so turned on by you as I am in this very moment."

I laughed and hooked my arm around Emmett's waist as we headed out to meet our friends.

A/N: 500k reads!!! And a little gift to say thanks!

OH MY GOD!! 500,000 READS!!!!!!!

I truly never thought anything I wrote would come even close to this milestone. I am so grateful that so many people have found this story and not only read it, but embraced it so thoroughly. I've had people tell me this is their favorite thing they've read on Wattpad, and how much this story has meant to them. I can't express how much that means to me. I know I don't reply very often, but I do read all of the comments and sometimes they melt my heart and make me so overwhelmed, especially on days that aren't so great. So thank you to anyone who has ever taken the time to comment, even if it was just an emoji. Or if you did the little reaction things. And thank you to everyone who voted on the chapters. Honestly, thank you for just reading it. Even if you didn't do any of that other stuff. I appreciate you all.

So I hit 500k in December and I had planned to write this as a Christmas gift to all you lovely people, but I got very busy with the holidays and family stuff and then unfortunately I had a bout of Covid. But I didn't want to let this moment pass without thanking everyone.

So I know it's very late, and I'm sorry for that, but without further ado, here's Clay and Emmett's first Christmas.

Bonus Scene: First Christmas (That I Loved You)

— Clay —

After we both did our regular family Christmases, Emmett came over so we could exchange our gifts. Emmett said Christmas wasn't a huge deal in their family. Walking into their house in December you wouldn't even know it

was a holiday except for the tree, which Emmett decorated to look like it came out of an ad for a home decor store.

My mom had our house decked out by the Sunday after Thanksgiving. The yard had everything from inflatable snowmen to an animatronic Santa's sleigh, complete with reindeer and a shiny nosed Rudolph. Every line of our house was strung with lights. Typically they'd be clear, but without telling me, this year she went out and got multicolored lights, stating, "If you won't let me put up a Pride flag to show you support, then I'm damn sure making Christmas as gay as I can."

I rolled my eyes at her, but secretly I was overjoyed. How the hell did I get so lucky?

I decided I'd buy her a pride flag and let her fly it. I didn't need to hide anymore. All the people that mattered knew, and then some, thanks to my announcement. I cringed at my past self for deciding to do it that way. God, I was such a drama queen about it. But that me got me here with Emmett and acceptance and even some new queer friends thanks to the LGBTQ+ club at school, so I was grateful to him.

When I opened the door, I couldn't see Emmett past the huge gift wrapped rectangle in his hands. I knew they were his by the Christmas nails he'd just had done last week. The little "CALM" on his index finger made my heart flutter just like it did the first time I saw it. He said, "Not only is calm a Christmas word, it's also your initials so now I always have you with me."

"That's so fucking corny," I told him before giving him the most passionate kiss.

I stepped aside and told him to come in. "That's quite a package you've got there, baby."

He twisted so the I could see him. His smirk did things to me. He leaned in to kiss me. "And it's all yours."

"Aren't I a lucky boy?"

"Depending on what you got me, you might be later."

I looked around, even though I knew the house was empty. My parent had taken Rachel and Teddy to our Grandma's house already. I was supposed to join them with Emmett as soon as he got here.

But they might have to wait a bit longer for us.

I didn't even notice how thin the gift was until he laid it flat on the loveseat. I made him promise not to spend very much on my gift since he'd just gifted me a pair of diamond stud earrings for my birthday two weeks ago.

I went to the Christmas tree to retrieve the lone gift-wrapped box that remained from the mountain that had been there in the morning. He ripped into the small box as soon as it was in his hands. My boyfriend was a lot of things; patient was not one of them.

His eyes lit up when he pulled out the red heart-shaped sunglasses that matched the ones from Taylor Swift's "22" music video.

"They're not official," I said. I didn't want to get his hopes up. "I couldn't find any real ones, so I had to go with knock-offs that looked as close to Taylor's as I could get them."

Emmett laid them on the coffee table before lunging at me. He jumped onto me and I barely had time to process and grab his legs before he could fall. He squeezed me tight with his arms and legs before pulling back. He gripped my face and planted a kiss on me that almost made me drop him.

When he was done, I let him down. "You heard the part where they aren't real, right?"

He nodded. "I don't care. The fact that you even went to the trouble of looking for replicas is the sweetest thing ever."

He grabbed up the glasses and put them on. "How do I look?"

"Happy, free, confused, and lovely at the same time."

"Close enough." His smirk told me I'd gotten something wrong, but I didn't know what.

He stepped to the side and waved his hands dramatically towards the loveseat. "And now your turn, my love."

Unlike Emmett, I went the more meticulous route for opening the wrapping paper, undoing each taped corner. He sat on the sofa, his leg bouncing like a jackhammer.

Because of the way I opened it, I saw the back first. It was a gigantic black frame. I couldn't imagine what he'd put in something this size. A blown up photo of himself to hang in my room? He'd confessed that he once felt jealous that I'd had a photo of Summer still up the first time he saw my bedroom.

I glance up to see him chewing his bottom lip. He looked anxious, but also a bit excited. Like he couldn't wait for me to see it.

Finally I put him out of his misery and flipped it over. I gasped at the rainbow collage like the one I'd admired in his bedroom.

But this one wasn't an exact replica. These weren't his favorite movies. Some of his favorites were on there, but so were some of mine.

It took me longer than I'd like to admit to realize the significance of these specific movies.

I looked up at him again, tears welling in my eyes. "Are these..." I pointed to the frame, getting too choked up to finish the thought.

"That's every movie we've watched together since we met."

I nodded. That's what I was going to say. "Even the terrible ones are on here."

"Yeah. Because they may have been bad movies, but they were great memories."

I set the frame aside and went to hug him. "I love you so much."

"I love you too." Emmett squeezed me tightly. "Which is why I couldn't let you live in that boring, basic, beige, bland-ass straight-boy room for one more second."

I pulled away so I could stand up. I held my hand out to him, which he took without a second of hesitation. "Want to help find a place to hang it. My room needs to be gayer immediately."

"It really does."

When we passed the loveseat, Emmett reached for the frame.

I stopped him. "Em, we're not actually hanging it right now."

"But you said—" his brows shot halfway up his forehead. "Oh, right! Gotcha."

"Sometimes I question if you're as smart as you claim to be."

He gave me a light shove, chuckling. "Fuck you."

"Yeah. That's the idea."

Emmett grabbed me around the waist to hold me in place as his free hand tickled me mercilessly. I tried to break free, but he was deceptively strong for a such a skinny guy. Since I couldn't get free, I had no other choice but to go on the offensive and mount a counter-attack at his arm pit where he was most vulnerable. His arm fell from my waist as he tried to protect his most ticklish spot.

We chased each other around the coffee table, laughing. With the house already so warm from the heat, we both quickly worked up a sweat in our winter clothes.

I smiled across the coffee table at him and reached for the hem of my sweater to pull it over my head. Emmett didn't hesitate to take off his hoodie. It pulled his shirt halfway up his torso. He jumped when I reached

across to touch his bare stomach. Perhaps he thought I was about to reignite the tickling. Instead, I pushed his shirt up. He took the hint and took it all off at once.

I stepped around the coffee table to kiss his shoulder. His fingers traced a line down my arm. He tugged on my tank top. I raised my arms to let him remove it. once the shirt was discarded, his hands found my face. His thumb stroked my jawline as he moved in for a kiss.

We were definitely going to be late to the party, but in this moment all I could think about was his hands on me, trying to pull me into him, and our lips melding us together.

Best Christmas ever!